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In the loving memory of
Prof. Indulata Sukla (1944-2022)

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Writing Self, Writing Resistance: Women's Life Writing in India

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In the loving memory of
Prof. Indulata Sukla (1944-2022)

Writing Self, Writing Resistance: Women's Life Writing in India

MUKUL CHATURVEDI

I was angry with myself for wanting to read books. Girls did not read... Anyway, I was pleased that I was able to perform this impossible feat at least in a dream. My life was blessed!

Amar Jiban

Published in 1868, *Amar Jiban* records the long and difficult struggle of Rasasundari Debi to acquire literacy in a society that prohibited women's learning and education. *Amar Jiban* is the first autobiography written by a woman in Bengali language, perhaps the first in any Indian language. To achieve this impossible feat "at least in a dream" sets Rasasundari on an effort where she steadily and stealthily learns to read the alphabet, becomes a 'jitaakshara' (winner of letters) and goes on to write her autobiography. A landmark text to explore the key concerns of women's life writing in India, it is fortuitous to begin with an exploration of Rasasundari Debi's account as it outlines not only how women's life writing serves as an archival source of their lived experience but also how life narratives have impacted feminist research, scholarship and given a vocabulary to women's activism. Forbidden to read and write as it would bring widowhood, Rasasundari's life is confined within the ideologies of domesticity and femininity. As she writes about her experiences of being a wife and mother there is an emergence of voice that hesitates to question the societal norms, yet her account demystifies the figure of the mother and housewife and presents domestic duties as laborious and unfulfilling. Rasasundari's act of learning to read is an act of transgression against established social norms and by publishing her autobiography she also enters the public domain that was forbidden for women in her time. Feminist historians like Tanika Sarkar have examined in detail how Rasasundari acquires means of self-representation by using the tropes of spiritual autobiography and legitimising her desire to learn the alphabet by dreaming of Chaitanya Bhagwat. Women's life writing thus offers a crucial site to examine questions of subjectivity and agency as it makes visible the often-neglected world of women's experience and their complex negotiations to become a 'speaking subject'. Rasasundari's lament that "Wasn't it a matter to be regretted, that I had to go through all this humiliation just because I was a woman?" marks one such moment when exclusion and neglect are foregrounded as part of women's everyday experience.

Historically, the life writing of the Indian women can be traced back to the latter half of the nineteenth century in varied forms like autobiographies, memoirs, journals, letters, diaries, and travel accounts that allow us to reclaim their voices in their own words. However, women's writing can be traced back to 600 B.C, as has been shown by K. Lalitha and Susie Tharu in their path breaking two volumes of *Women's Writing in India*. The two volumes retrieve writings that had been relegated to the margins of history and attempt to build women's literary tradition by including fictional, non-fictional, and autobiographical pieces by women. The larger purpose of the volume is to reconstruct "the changing ideological configurations in which women wrote and were read" (38) and to read women's writings "as documents that display what is at stake in the embattled practices of self and agency, and in the making of a habitable world, at the margins of patriarchies

constituted by the emerging bourgeoisie of empire and nation.” (39) Tharu and Lalitha’s archival work makes significant intervention by compilation of literature produced by women from Buddhist Therigathas to contemporary times. Also, if we are to examine the questions of women’s selfhood and agency as is the focus of this special issue, then it is also imperative to understand that the sites of resistance “cannot be separated from the specific historical political conjectures that constituted their world”. (ibid. 153) Women’s containment within the ideologies of femininity and domesticity, their lower levels of literacy rather exclusion from access to education, and a demarcation between the spaces of home and world, resulted in a near absence about the knowledge of their lives and their struggles to carve out a space for themselves. Early nineteenth century autobiographies of women like Rasasundari, Krupabai Sattianadhan, Pandit Ramabai Saraswati, and Lakshmibai Tilak foreground many such transgressions that came to define women’s life writing. Not only it made visible the world of women’s experience but also gave a new vocabulary where the language of spirituality, religion, intimacy, and domesticity is used to articulate negotiations with everyday life. As women gained access to education and entered public domain, the twentieth century saw well known autobiographies by famous figures like Cornelia Sorabjee, Savitri Devi Nanda, Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam and Nayantara Sahgal who left an indelible mark of growing feminist consciousness in their autobiographies. Other than women in public life and well known writers, actresses like Binodini Dasi and Hamsa Wadkar also wrote autobiographies. More recently, life writing by Dalit women have emerged as a powerful field that includes a vast body of literature across different Indian languages. These narratives offer a useful corrective to understanding women’s resistance practices and their collective action towards social change despite the oppression and victimization that define their daily lives.

Any exploration of life writing forms takes us back to its roots in autobiographical discourse. The argument that autobiography is fundamentally a Western discourse (Gusdorf), and if at all it exists in other cultures is shaped by the legacy of the West is called into question by broadening the parameters of the genre, something that the emergent form of life writing has done. (Smith and Watson 1998) Theoretical and critical reflections on life writing gained momentum at the intersection of feminist and postcolonial studies that had the explicit agenda of retrieving historically marginalized voices and locate moments of resistance and agency. To a large extent the emergence of life writing as a robust area of research has to do with these recent interventions that tried to include writings by historically marginalized subjects that were excluded from the realms of representation. The existence of autobiographical literature by women asserts to a rising preoccupation with the self and the and the emergence of varied life writing forms to reclaim voice and agency that is denied to them. Life writing also becomes a way of entering public domain as it collapses the traditional the binary between personal and political that shapes women’s everyday life. Early scholars like Malavika Karlekar, Ranjana Harish, Uma Chakravarti, Tanika Sarkar and Kumkum Roy have undertaken interdisciplinary research on women’s writing and brought these debates into the mainstream. Drawing on a spectrum of life writing forms like such as dairies, memoirs, collaborative life writing, prison writing, Dalit autobiography, folk songs, disability life writing, biographies of devadasis, and sex worker, this special issue argues that life writing by women has expanded the autobiographical discourse to includes those subjects that have been historically marginalized. By examining the intersections of caste, class, religion, culture, gender, language, ability in women’s life writing texts, this special issue focusses on possibilities of reconfiguring mainstream history writing that often ignores women as social and political actors and undermines their agency and activism in bringing about change. The diverse essays in the volume are drawn from different regional languages and show how life writing foregrounds the construction of female subjectivity in very act of narrating the self.

The earliest women’s auto/biographical writings can be traced back to the nineteenth century when the reformist discourse gained momentum in India. Focussing on women’s life writing from that period reveals that while women’s subjectivities were shaped by the discourse of social reform

movements they also contested the ideological moorings of the reformist discourse that set boundaries for women. The first essay in the collection by Mohd. Afzal focusses on the biographical compilation by Muhammadi Begum (1877–1908) of Asrafunnisa's life titled as *Hayat-e-Ashraf* (1904, *The Life of Ashrafunnisa*) one of the earliest biographies of an ordinary Indian Muslim woman, who went on to become a teacher in a semi-government school. Ashrafunnisa's (1840–1903) record of the difficulties she encountered in learning to read and write in a patriarchal society was originally published in two instalments in March 23 and 30, 1899 in *Tehzib-e-Nisvan*, edited by Muhammadi, the first Muslim woman to edit an Urdu journal. The essay traces the lives of two extraordinary women who carved a space for themselves despite the strictures of patriarchal society against women's education and paid work. Examining the challenges faced by women, the essay offers an engaging analysis of how the genre auto/biography is appropriated by Muslim women to enter the public domain and negotiate the conflicting demands of respectability and economic hardship as they move beyond the confines of home.

Contextualizing the texts within the larger debates of reformist politics demonstrates how the life writing by women is an act of transgression, an effort to reclaim voice, no matter how conditioned it is by dominant discourse. The gaps and silences in these texts also speak eloquently about women's lives. Shilpi Basak's essay on Manada Devi's memoir *Shikshita Potitar Atmochorit* (1929) in Bengali, (translated as *An Educated Woman in Prostitution: A Memoir of Lust, Exploitation, Deceit* in 2021 by Arunava Sinha) focuses on the condition of women in the backdrop of the contemporary social, political and moral situation of colonial Bengal. While the Bengal Renaissance saw a movement for *strishiksha* (women's education) widow remarriage, and deliberation on 'woman's question', the paper shows how patriarchal double-standards and the hypocritical liberalism effects the condition of women across class and caste in late 19th and early 20th century Bengal. The narrator, an educated prostitute, negotiates respectability by using her literacy as a tool to comment on the social and political condition of women in society thereby challenging the reformist discourse on women's upliftment. By talking about participation of 'fallen' women in Gandhi's movement, Manada Devi, claims how the marginalised and socially outcaste women contributed towards the freedom movement. In South India, the question of the devadasi was quite centrally located within its reformist discourse. Paromita Bose's essay on the biographies of female performers who belonged to the devadasi community traces the effects of anti-nautch movement and the abolition of devadasi system on the lives of practitioners. Focusing on the biographies of Veena Dhanammal, Bangalore Nagarathnamma, M.S. Subbulakshmi, all belonging to devadasi community, the paper demonstrates how these women negotiated their identities amidst the shifting attitudes of society towards dance and music. Being criminalised by the law, the devadasi was seen as evil and hence had to be removed from the society. Interestingly, while the art form was moved away from the 'monopoly' of hereditary families rendering the families impoverished, it now began to be taught to the children of 'respectable' communities, which not only would learn dance but also take it up as a profession. Thus, life writings by women who faced social ostracism highlight how they acquire a sense of self-worth through the act of writing.

One important aspect of life writing is that it helps us to think critically about the diminished economic, political, cultural, and interpersonal rights of women and how it enables them claim recognition of their struggles. Reshma Jose's paper focuses on the emerging field of life writing by disabled women and highlights multiple marginalization suffered by them. The essay examines the intersection of disability, gender and sexuality and argues that disability life narratives posit an active desiring sexual subject and contests the stereotype of disabled women as asexual. In contrast to the passive and objectified view of disabled women's lives Jose's paper offers an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural, historical, and political context of these narratives. Like disability life narratives, Dalit women's life writing across regional Indian languages has emerged as a powerful body of writing that moves beyond the narrative of victimhood and offers an intersectional analysis

of caste patriarchy and how it undermines their contribution to Dalit discourse and activism. Tejaswini Deo's examines three Dalit life narratives written in Marathi by Urmila Pawar (*Aidan*), Kumud Pawade (*Antasphot*), and Mukta Sarvagod (*Mitleli Kawade*) that foreground the emancipatory struggles of Dalit women in post Ambedkarite era. As representatives of an emerging Dalit middle-class in Maharashtra, the self-reflexive tone of their narratives articulates the tensions embedded in Dalit discourse that confine the women to the caste hierarchy despite all attempts at moving beyond it through acquiring education and working towards betterment of their family and community. The narratives of women who exist on the margins of society have found life writing as an empowering genre that enables them to validate their experience of exclusion and oppression. Also, translation of Dalit writing into English has played a key role in wider circulation of these texts across Indian languages and it has even acquired transnational appeal.

Women's oral subcultures also offer a window into their everyday lives and are an important source of information about their community and related social and cultural practices. The non-literate oral world of these reveal how women negotiate patriarchal power structures through their folk cultural practices that are communitarian in nature. Sumadhura Roy's paper examines one such tradition of folk songs by Rajbangsi women of North Bengal that are subversive in nature as they challenge normative assumptions about female sexuality. Focussing on oral songs of *bhawaiya* and *chatka*, as narratives of their lives, these songs offers space for articulation of desire and dissent and are an importance source of documenting women's resistance practices in a society that attempts to contain female sexuality. Also, through their songs reclaim spaces for assertion of their choice and agency.

One of the defining aspect of women's life writing is how women's role as agents of change and their contribution to society gets inscribed in their writing. Madhumita Roy's essay on the memoir of Gretchen Green, an American paramedic nurse, who came to Shantiniketan when Rabindranath Tagore was in dire need of a dedicated medical worker to serve the villages that came under his project of rural reconstruction. In her memoir, Green provides a detailed picture of her stay and work at the poet's rural reconstruction project. The essay reconstructs a history of science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Santi Niketan whose discursive contours were largely defined and constructed by eminent male teachers as well as prolific writers of science. Santiniketan becomes a microcosmic representation of the larger scenario of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal where science was largely considered to be a male prerogative and women were systematically kept at the fringes as far as scientific education was concerned. Focusing on Green's memoir brings to light the lesser-known aspects of women's lives and their interest in science which was considered an exclusive male domain.

Many life writing texts are collaboratively produced and pose methodological as well ethical challenges as the final production of the text might involve an oral subject, transcriber/editor, and a translator. Gayatri Spivak has already alerted us to the pitfalls of speaking for the subaltern subject because one may misrepresent her and appropriate her voice. (Spivak) However, even in life writing texts authored by the subject themselves, the gap between the narrating and the narrated subject has been dealt extensively in autobiography criticism. (Lejeune) The question of a singular, transparent autobiographical voice has been subject of debate and autobiographical writing has been read as a performative act. Keeping these theoretical issues in mind, Natasa Thoudam's paper focuses on the ethical and political aspects of collaboration in Mary Kom's collaborative autobiography, *An Autobiography: Unbreakable*. The paper makes an important contribution to women's life writing in India by examining the autobiography of a sports woman from Manipur and makes a nuanced analysis by addressing the politics of identity formation. While Mary is constructed as a 'national hero' and her narrative is co-opted in the national imaginary, women like Irom Sharmila from Manipur are relegated to the margins. Addressing the question of authorship that inform this collaborative narrative, the paper draws attention to the fissures in Mary's account and her silent refusal to be co-opted thus. Also, the paper draws attention to the gendered violence that accompa-

nies construction of Mary's heroic narrative. Written over a long period of time with family and professional support, Bilquis Jehan Khan's collaborative autobiography, *A Song of Hyderabad* (2010) stands out for its frank exploration of intimate aspects of her life. Nazia Akhtar's essay examines the crisis of subjectivity in Bilquis's narrative while addressing two important events in her life; consummation of marriage and menstruation, subjects that were considered taboo to be spoken about publicly. Given Bilquis's royal lineage and the multiple collaborators who were responsible for creating the final text, one can read several tensions in her account and a layered negotiation with familial and social circumstances that shape her experience of these events. Bilquis's autobiographical performance marks many such moments, where despite the radical act of defiance as she discusses these important events in her life, the narrative also lays bare the limits of such performance. The autobiographical endeavour also involves an element of self-censorship as the narrator is careful in representing a self that breaches the social conventions and yet remains contained within the bounds of propriety.

One important dimension of life writing is how it negotiates the question of individuality with representativeness of the times in which it was written making the narrative have a larger social, political, and cultural value. Shubra Ray's paper examines this crucial aspect in Dilara Hashem's *Kaktaliyo* (Coincidences) and explores the unique trajectory that her self-expression takes given the hegemonic presuppositions which exist about her identity as a Bengali Muslim. The paper argues that the representation of South Asian Muslim women in the diaspora has been marked by certain predetermined themes related to Islamic religious practices and veiling. Despite her diasporic location Hashem, refuses to be appropriated by such discourses and this is done through the delineation of her childhood in undivided Bengal, which she has called fairly representative of her class. The narrator does not posit herself as a victim or a reactionary and this stands her in good stead in both critiquing the gender oppression and espousing her identity as a Bengali Muslim. Dilara Hashem's account critiques a monolithic perspective on Islam through the depiction of a life steeped in rationality and non-conformity, where religion is only one component of one's identity. Thus, life narratives disrupt homogenous assumptions about women's lives and agency as they speak from multiple subject positions. Paramita Purkayastha's traces the lives of two such women who do not fit in the category of 'birangona' or 'muktijoddha' in the context of Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. The paper examines Lily Halder and Sanchita Roy's varied experience of migration and border crossing from East Pakistan to West Bengal during the war years, as female adolescents, even as they are tied together by the same religion and caste. The paper attempts to retrieve those gendered experiences that have been marginalized in the dominant heroic narratives of the war. A critical examination of women's narratives also brings to light that the romanticization of women as brave heroines or as hapless victims does not yield a complex understanding of their agency. The task of constructing autobiographical subjectivity becomes even more daunting when examining women's experience of incarceration as the female body becomes a contested terrain within the institutional apparatus of the state and rendering bodily autonomy even more problematic. Shayantani Das's paper examines one such prison narrative by Minakshi Sen's *Jeler Bhitor Jel* (1994), an account of her involvement in Naxalite movement, where she was arrested on false charges and detained without trial. The subject-narrator uses aesthetic and political strategies to document the lives of other female inmates and elaborates the physical and psychological torture aimed at breaking their sense of self. The text foregrounds the challenges of constructing the autobiographical self and it is only by receding and distancing herself from other inmates that the narrator becomes a speaking subject.

Despite a steady rise in the publication of life writings by women across regional languages in India, there is scant autobiographical literature by women in Hindi, despite its supposedly dominant status, both as a widely spoken tongue and also as an official language along with English. However, there is a vibrant print culture in Hindi that has shaped the literary discourse and inspired creativity across genres, including life writing. Shubhra Dubey examines well-known Hindi writer, Maitreyi Pushpa's two part autobiographical undertaking *Kasturi Kundal Basai* (2002) and *Gudiya Bheetar*

Gudiya (2008). The paper draws attention to the exigencies of the autobiographical endeavour in both the volumes and Pushpa's negotiation with the vibrant world of Hindi print culture that launched her as a writer and continued to shape her persona to the larger reading public. With her commitment to *streevimarsh* (feminist discourse in the Hindi sphere) that is invoked several times in the two texts to reflect on *streejeevan* (life of a woman), Pushpa makes an important contribution to women's life writing by positioning the autobiographical act as an *instance* and example of a gendered life opened up to public scrutiny. Thus, an analysis of women's life writing highlights that while there social and norms and conventions that limit women from rendering their individual experiences of subordination, they are not always acted upon, rather they re-act as women and emerge as agentic beings. The essays in this special issue argue that women's life narratives do not foreground 'essential' and 'unitary' selves, instead, women speak or are spoken into existence only in terms of available discourses. Women's resistance practices emerges from the multiple subject positions available to them, through which they are constituted, and through which they constitute themselves. The essays demonstrate that life writing does not aim to celebrate individual acts of heroism or struggle for personhood, rather how women as writing/speaking subjects move within and between discourses, challenging, co-opting, modifying both in terms of her own subjectivity and in relation to the subjectivity of others. Women's life writing advances our understanding of how agency is discursively constituted and their role as responsible social and political actors in bringing about change.

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Ḥayāt-e Ashraf: Agency, Resistance, and Muslim Women's Life Writing in Colonial North India*

MOHAMMED AFZAL

Abstract: The compilation by Muḥammadi Begum (1877-1908) of Ashrafunnisa's life titled *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf* (1904, *The Life of Ashrafunnisa*) is one of the earliest biographies of an ordinary Indian Muslim woman. This biographical account includes Muḥammadi's version of Ashrafunnisa's life, the articles and letters written by Ashrafunnisa herself, and other women. The article in which Ashrafunnisa (1840-1903) recorded the difficulties she encountered in learning to read and write in a patriarchal society was originally published in two instalments on March 23 and 30, 1899 in *Tahẓīb-e Nisvān* and was subsequently included in *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf*. The publication of this autobiographical narrative in the women's magazine edited by Muḥammadi marks the inception of a feminist consciousness on Urdu literary scene in early twentieth-century North India. Since Muḥammadi was the first Muslim woman to edit an Urdu journal, her consequent decision to compile the life of a working woman points to what was common in their life. Muḥammadi's entry into the male dominated field of Urdu literature and Ashrafunnisa's appointment to the post of a teacher in a semi-government girls' school announced the triumphant arrival of *ashraf* Muslim women in the public sphere. This biography was compiled after Ashrafunnisa's death in 1903 as a tribute to the extraordinary life of an ordinary Muslim woman and reads like a female bildungsroman in Urdu. This paper investigates the dilemma faced by Ashrafunnisa after her widowhood and her negotiations with the contending demands of respectability and financial constraints. The intertwining of Ashrafunnisa's life with the growth of the educational institution she served in this biography challenged the nineteenth-century reformist discourse on domesticity that confined women to the household. My analysis of *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf* seeks to demonstrate that Indian women in the nineteenth-century contested the reformist discourse on womanhood and were actively engaged in recasting themselves.

Keywords: Indian Muslim women, women's biography in Urdu, Indian Muslim reformers, *Tahẓīb-e Nisvān*, colonial educational institutions, job opportunities for women, early twentieth-century India.

Gender, Genre, and Print Culture

The proliferation of lithographic presses in late-nineteenth century North India enabled the transformation of the old genres and the growth of the new. The immense literary possibilities created by the print revolution in North India also modified the traditional Urdu genres such as *ṭabaqat* and *taẓkirah*.¹ The discussion of the development and spread of these genres to South Asia is beyond the scope of this paper. A transition from these traditional biographical genres to modern Urdu biography is detectable in *Āb-e Ḥayāt* (1880, *The Water of Life*) by Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād (1830-1910). In *Āb-e Ḥayāt*, Āzād touched upon the criticism of these anthologies offered by people who turned to English poetics after 1857: that these anthologies neither describe the biographical details, temperament, character and habits of a person, nor their strong and weak points, nor the relationship of an author with his contemporaries

(Āzād p. 55). Despite Āzād's awareness of the shortcomings of *taẓkirahs*, he is deeply immersed in this tradition (Pritchett 64). Because of the portraits of Urdu poets drawn in *Ab-e Ḥayāt*, it can be categorised as a transitional work between traditional biographical anthologies and the modern genre of biography in Urdu (Faṭīma 71). Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914) made a pioneering contribution to the art of modern biography in Urdu language with the publication of *Ḥayāt-e Sa'dī* (The Life of Sa'dī, 1881), *Yādgar-e Ghālib* (The Memoir of Ghālib, 1897), and *Ḥayāt-e Jāved* (The Life of Syed Aḥmad Ḳhān 1901). These works are pronounced a milestone in the development of this genre (Faṭīma 87). Ḥālī utilised biography to spread awakening, reform, and the idea of progress among Muslims. He penned the life of Syed Aḥmad Ḳhān (1817–1898) to fulfil precisely this purpose. The author of *Ḥayāt-e Jāved* thought of writing it after the establishment of Aligarh College and the Urdu journal, *Tahzīb-al Aḳhlāq* by Syed Aḥmad Ḳhān (Ḥālī 23). It pays a glowing tribute to Syed Aḥmad's monumental contributions to the upliftment of Muslim community in North India.

However, the new genre of Urdu biography did not remain confined to the commemoration of the literary feats and extraordinary deeds of Muslim men. Muḥammadi Begum (1877–1908) appropriated the newly emergent genre of Urdu biography to commemorate the life of a Muslim widow, Ashrafunnisa, also known as Bibi Ashraf. If a section of *Ḥayāt-e Jāved* listed Syed Aḥmad's achievements as the founder of the Aligarh College, Muḥammadi's *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf* (1904) asserted the centrality of Ashrafunnisa to the growth of a semi-government primary school. Hālī's biography served to lionise Syed Aḥmad, while Muḥammadi sought to expand the scope of this genre to publicise Ashrafunnisa's pioneering work in the field of women's education. If Syed's life was held up as an example for Muslim community of North India to adapt to the changed economic and political circumstances of the twentieth-century, Muḥammadi sought to present the life of a working woman as an inspiring role model for Indian Muslim women. The title echoes both the name of the protagonist and the eminence of Ashrafunnisa as a school teacher. What brings Muḥammadi Begum and Ashrafunnisa together is their status as professionals. The compilation of this biography by the editor of *Tahzīb-e Nisvān* is not only an attempt at gendering the genre of biography in Urdu but also to attach respectability to women's entry into public service. In *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf*, Muḥammadi Begum raised a biographical memorial to Ashrafunnisa's achievements, drawing on the eulogistic language of biographies composed by her contemporaries.

Muḥammadi Begum and *Tahzīb-e Nisvān*

Muḥammadi Begum was the daughter of Syed Aḥmad Shafī, who rose to the position of Extra Assistant Commissioner in the Punjab government in the nineteenth-century (Begum, *A Most Noble Life* 109). She was married to a Muslim reformer Mumtāz 'Alī (1860–1935), who penned a tract on women's rights in Islam titled *Huqūq-e Nisvān* (Women's Rights, 1898). In partnership with her husband, Muḥammadi founded the Urdu journal *Tahzīb-e Nisvān* in Lahore in 1898. At a young age of twenty, Muḥammadi achieved the distinction of being the first woman editor of an Urdu weekly magazine for women. Even though Syed Aḥmad suggested the name of the journal (which echoed the title of his own prestigious paper *Tahzīb-al Aḳhlāq*), he advised Mumtāz 'Alī not to start it ('Alī 425). *Tahzīb-e Nisvān* was a product of the wave of periodical literature directed at women readers in the 1880s and 1890s: *Rafīq-e Nisvān* (A Woman's Friend, 1884), *Aḳhbār-un Nisā* (The Journal for Women, 1884), and *Sharīf Bibiyān* (Respectable Women, 1893). Mumtāz as the founder of the prestigious publication house "Dār ul-ishā'at Punjāb" in Lahore exploited the technology of print for advocating women's rights (Tāhir 27). Though *Tahzīb* was originally conceived of as a magazine devoted to the publication of women's articles, men's contributions were also accepted after the establishment of the paper. By printing national and international news, the magazine sought to expand the world

of women beyond the narrow confines of domesticity. Muḥammadi's exercise of full editorial authority over the selection of articles encouraged women to send their contributions for the journal (Minault 113). From 1898 till her death in 1908, her journalistic skill and intellectual calibre made *Tahẓīb* an organ of women's voices.

Ḥayāt-e Ashraf is an alternative representation of the life of a Muslim woman, whose economic independence and determination is held up for emulation. The life of a widow who earned her livelihood as a teacher and headmistress served as a role model for the editor of *Tahẓīb*, who was buried next to her grave as per her wish. Ashrafunnisa's contribution of poems and essays to *Tahẓīb* was a violation of the promise she made to her uncle of never writing to any married man or woman in her life, an exception that is a measure of their true friendship (Begum *Majmua'* 193). The article in which Ashrafunnisa penned the obstacles she faced in learning to read and write in a patriarchal society was originally published in two instalments on March 23 and 30, 1899 in *Tahẓīb-e Nisvān*. Later this autobiographical piece was included in the biography Muḥammadi published as *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf*. Their friendship was so deep that it also overcame the prejudices of sectarian divide between Shi'as and Sunnis rife at that time. Muḥammadi Begum was a Sunni, Ashrafunnisa was a Shi'a. *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf* is an embodiment of their mutual affection and a feeling of sisterhood. Because of their origins in Syed families of Western Uttar Pradesh and as native speakers of Urdu in Lahore, the two professional women shared a deep bond.

Fictional Heroine and the Profession of Teaching

This account of the life of an Indian Muslim female teacher in the second half of the nineteenth-century can be discussed with reference to the fictional heroine created by a male novelist, Naẓīr Aḥmad (1830–1912). He included Muslim women within the programme of modern education launched by Syed Aḥmad Ḳhān by writing fictional works on this theme. His novel *Mirāt ul-'Arūs* (1869) has Asgharī as its heroine who opens a *maktab* (school) for neighbourhood girls at her home and instructs them in the basics of housekeeping apart from reading and writing. Naẓīr's second novel *Banāt un-N'ash* (1872) is considered a sequel to *Mirāt* because it deals primarily with the syllabus of the school Asgharī opened in the previous novel. The heroine's sister-in-law, Mahmūdā assists her in running the school. The novel is often described as a series of lectures on geography and other topics of general knowledge. The elucidation of such difficult subjects and various topics in the book as arithmetic, gravity, magnetism, astronomy, telescope, climate, geography, the speed of light, lightning and thunder serve the purpose of a suitable text-book for girls. The novelist uses the appeal of stories and anecdotes to make lessons more interesting. Moreover, the centrality of Husn Ārā's character to the plot of the novel does not reduce it to the status of a mere text-book. The reformation of this aristocratic girl is a tribute to Asgharī's teaching skill and moral influence on her pupils. Asgharī is presented as a model teacher in a novel that depicts Naẓīr's ideal of a girls' school. The character of Asgharī as delineated in *Mirāt* and *Banāt* became a role model for generations of young Muslim girls in late nineteenth-century and inspired the first Urdu woman novelist Rashīdunnisā (Jālibī 1145). The portrayal of an efficient, intelligent, and dynamic heroine who towers above men around her had a profound influence on South Asian women. Inclusion of teaching as a prominent feature in the portrayal of an ideal wife must have created in the mind of young Muslim girls an aspiration for this profession. The literary portrayal of a fictional *ustani* (lady teacher) forged a new ideal Muslim woman. However, the establishment of a school in the courtyard of Asgharī's home makes it easier for her to adhere to the demands of purdah, central to the definition of a *sharif* woman in nineteenth-century North India. Asgharī's refusal to accept wages for teaching girls in her home is a marker of her *sharāfat*. Naẓīr's decision not to include remuneration in the literary representation of an Indian Muslim female teacher is indicative of the stigma attached to the concept of women's earning in her age. This reveals the elitism of the male reformist agenda

that created a discourse of womanhood with scant regard to the problems and dilemmas Indian Muslim women from the lower strata of society confronted. A contrast between the lived experience of a poor widow and the cloistered virtue of honour and exalted idea of respectability portrayed by male reformers is drawn in the following section.

Biography, Domesticity, and Gender Norms

Muḥammadi's project of reimagining the gender rules of orthodox Indian society is also visible in the imaginative works she composed. *Sharīf Beṭī* (A Noble Daughter, 1908) is the fictional narrative of a poor Muslim girl who adopts the profession of teaching to rise to prosperity. Setting up a school in her house to teach the girls of her neighbourhood, she uses the tool of education to announce the radical message of female economic independence (Begum *Sharīf Beṭī*). In both biographical and literary works, the editor of *Tahẓīb-e Nisvān* destigmatised the concept of women's paid work (Khoja-Moolji 45). Muḥammadi's decision to edit the biography of a working woman was aimed at demonstrating the untenability of the gendered division of labour in the lower echelons of society. The biographer highlights a Muslim widow's negotiations with the conflicting demands of respectability and economic hardship to redefine the concept of *sharāfat* in the changed political scenario of colonial North India. The biographer dwells on the precarious condition of the widow and her struggles:

"In her economic precarity and state of helplessness, the widow was left with no means of sustenance but to rely on her skills in sewing and lacemaking. She endured this trial with patience and determination and utilised her skills to meet her expenses and led a respectable life." (Begum *Majmua* 174. My translation.)

However, Ashrafunnisa's incessant efforts prove to be insufficient to fulfil the basic needs of the family and she has to finally accept the offer of a teaching job (Begum *Majmua* 180–81). By depicting economic compulsion in the biographical account of a widow's life, Muḥammadi exposed the elitist character of the reformist programme of Indian social reformers that focussed mainly on the reformation of household leaving unaddressed the question of women's economic self-sufficiency.

Though the element of economic precarity is shown as propelling her from the confines of home, the protagonist's refusal to marry again is also a declaration of her autonomy. Nineteenth-century male reformers' crusade against the disapproval of widow remarriage in Indian society was based on the centrality of marriage in women's life. The respectable life lived by Ashrafunnisa after the death of her husband is a symbol of self-reliance. That this proto-feminist consciousness is somewhat muted in this biography is symptomatic of the strict gender norms prevalent in Indian society in the first decade of the twentieth-century. There are many instances of this subversive impulse in the biography. Ashrafunnisa's imagined transgression of domestic boundaries is obvious in her account of the events of 1857 in the letter she writes to her father. While the letter of the brother of Ashrafunnisa's grandmother provided the news of the family members, her letter included the happenings of the Great rebellion. The comparison of her letters to a newspaper or a historical report points to the failure of domestic discourse to restrict her imagination to what is described as woman's proper sphere. The inclusion of incidents outside the confines of the household in her letters displays a propensity even in her adolescence to engage with the outside world.

Reformist Discourse, Colonial Educational Institutions, and New Opportunities for Indian Women

Ashrafunnisa belonged to those respectable Muslim families in the early nineteenth-century which moved to the ranks of a service gentry (Lal 173). Her father Syed Fataḥ Ḥusain chose the

profession of a lawyer and worked in Agra and Gwalior. Her husband, 'Ālamdār Ḥusain, was the product of the British educational institutions that opened up new opportunities of service in the colonial system. He studied Arabic and Persian at the Delhi College, which was central to the efflorescence of learning in the capital of India. His career began with his appointment as a Deputy Inspector of Schools in the Jalandhar district of Punjab and culminated in his recruitment as the Assistant Professor of Arabic and Persian at Government College in Lahore in 1865. However, it was unimaginable for Indian Muslim girls to get entry into these centres of learning as the custom of sexual segregation contributed to the exclusion of 'respectable' women from the public sphere (Mujeeb 12). After the death of her husband, Ashrafunnisa's adherence to the norm of *sharāfat* was responsible for her rejection of the teaching job offered by W.R.M. Holroyd, the Director of Public Instruction in Punjab. She instead chose to eke out earning from the work of embroidery and stitching to supplement a very meagre income from her ancestral property. The meaning of '*hāth kā hunar*' in the text can be interpreted as the skills of embroidery and stitching that she learnt before and after her marriage mentioned in the section "*Miyān Bībī kā Bāhamī Maslā*" (The Relationship between Husband and Wife) (Begum *Majmua*' 172). Ashrafunnisa's decision to decline government job for safeguarding the honour of her clan is indicative of how a traditional code of modesty curtailed the already limited options of employment available to women in late nineteenth-century (Begum *Majmua*' 180). Whatever income she managed to generate out of these skills was insufficient to meet basic expenses. Muḥammadi takes pains to stress that Ashrafunnisa agreed to accept the appointment in 1878 after Khwāja Ḥusain Pānīpatī's intervention and exhortations. The details of this episode show how delicately the biographer treated this complex issue. Ashrafunnisa steps out of the confines of home with strict adherence to purdah to avoid it being viewed as subversion of gender norms. The biographer's sensitivity to this subject is attributable to her own experience of working as the editor of women's magazine. The boundaries of work permissible to women are stretched to include a teaching assignment in a government educational institution.

However, the difference between a school set up within the precincts of home and women's educational institution is that the latter bestows upon its employees an identity based upon institutional affiliation and professional achievements (Sarkar 109–110). The ties formed by relationship with colleagues, pupils, and other professional women are the material of her biography. Ashrafunnisa was held in high esteem by the superintendents of the school and her name invariably figured in the annual prize distribution functions. Most female visitors from London and America, who were probably the wives of Christian missionaries, would come to meet her. Not only the school in which she taught but also all its branches were closed on receiving the news of her death. The public recognition bestowed upon her is displayed by a large crowd that gathered at the time of her funeral procession. The profusion of lament both inside and outside her house following her death was an acknowledgement of her status as an eminent Muslim woman.

Ashrafunnisa's improvement of the reputation of Victoria Girls School, Lahore and its upgradation to the level of a middle school under her watch shows an unwavering commitment to work. Her acceptance of the extra load of teaching work due to the expansion of syllabus after the upgradation of school is a display of professionalism. The fact that her pupils always received high marks in the subjects she taught is a testimony to the amelioration of the quality of instruction at Victoria Girls School. The seriousness with which she solved the problems of her students is narrated in an incident in which pupils' complaint against a palanquin-bearer is dismissed by a peon and is finally resolved by Ashrafunnisa's intervention (Begum *Majmua*' 198). Her centrality to the growth of a semi-government primary school illustrates the pioneering role she played in changing the society's perception of women's capabilities as institution builders.

The advocacy of women's education by Indian Muslim reformers was not envisaged as complementary to the aim of increasing employment opportunities for Indian women. For instance, in Naẓīr Aḥmad's Urdu novel *Mirāt ul-ʿArūs* (1869), Aṣḡharī's literacy and her successful management of the household are shown as inextricably connected. Therefore, Ashrafunnisa's fight for and use of education as a tool to enter the public domain is her transcendence of the reformist agenda and not her confinement to it as contended by Partha Chatterjee in "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question":

"Indeed, the nationalist construct of the new woman derived its ideological strength from the fact that it was able to make the goal of cultural refinement through education a personal challenge for every woman, thus opening up a domain where woman was an autonomous subject...It was a purpose which they [women] set for themselves in their personal lives as the object of their will; to achieve it was to achieve freedom." (Chatterjee, 323–24)

In Chatterjee's reading, women's educational enterprise is viewed as appropriated by a male reformist and nationalist agenda that deprived women of individuality and will. The underlying assumption in Chatterjee's analysis is the passivity of Indian women and their silent acquiescence to the male reformatory programmes.

Far from being the supine recipient of male corrective zeal, Indian women contested the reformist discourse on womanhood that sought to confine them to the household (Haris Qadeer and P.K. Yasser Arafath, 08–09). In the autobiographical section of *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf*, Ashrafunnisa places herself at the subject position. Her narrative underlines the determination of an ordinary Muslim woman to overcome all hurdles in the pursuit of learning and a career. The posting of her father in a remote location and the death of her mother in early childhood deprives her of parental help. The expulsion of a widowed *ustani* from their home for her remarriage leaves the protagonist of *Ḥayāt* with no educational aid for widow remarriage remained a taboo despite Indian reformers' crusade against this social evil. Her uncle's disapproval of women's learning to write is reflective of strong strictures against it in elite Muslim society. Kaika'us Ibn Iskandar's *Qābūs Nāma* (1082), an advice book popular in the Islamic world, sought to restrict women's access to the art of writing. Nasiruddin Tusi's *Akhlāq-e Nāṣirī*, a thirteenth-century text that exercised a strong influence on South Asian Muslim elites, warned against the supposed dangers posed by women's learning of reading and writing (Naim 219–20). The persistence of this orthodoxy in mid nineteenth-century India is reflective of the insurmountable problems Ashrafunnisa encountered in her educational adventures. However, the traditions and customs of society could not circumscribe a young girl's spirit and she managed to transcend the limits of learning set by patriarchy. Since she had already memorised *mujre-salām* when her mother was alive, she decided to borrow these texts from her friends for copying so that she could herself figure out words in Urdu and learn to read.² However, copying these words on a piece of paper would have aroused the suspicion of her relatives as writing was strictly forbidden to Muslim girls. She devised a novel way to acquire the art of writing:

"It occurred to me to use the blacking of girdle as ink and copy text at noon when people would be enjoying their siesta. That is precisely what I did. Trust me. After collecting the blacking of the griddle, the lid of the clay water pots, and twigs from the broom, I went out on the roof pretending that I was going there for sleep. And with a great sense of excitement, I began to copy out words." (168 My translation)

The innovative ways she devised to learn a forbidden art is evidence of her resourcefulness and initiative. Ashrafunnisa's refusal to submit to the dictates of a conservative society is a statement of courage and determination. Battling innumerable obstacles in a patriarchal society, she acquired the mastery of language to become the author of her own destiny.

Muslim Women, Religion, and Agency

Ashrafunnisa's biographical sketch emphasises her strict observance of religious rituals. A detailed description is given of the obligatory and voluntary prayers she performs to explain her spiritual condition. She is conferred the status of *mustajāb-al-dā'vat*, the one whose prayers are answered (p. 188). She organises the religious gatherings of women in her house to commemorate the tragic martyrdom of Imam Ḥusain. Muḥammadi makes use of the language of religious devotion as an emotional register to transform Ashrafunnisa into a saintly figure. The portrayal of a working widow as a pious woman was aimed at dispelling any possibility of aspersions cast on a woman stepping out of the normative space of home. This emphasis on the religious aspect of Ashrafunnisa's life sought to garner societal acceptance for the concept of women's earning of livelihood. The biographical account also foregrounds Ashrafunnisa's adherence to the institution of purdah, a sign of *sharafat* in late nineteenth-century Indian society. She not only ensured arrangement of veiling in classrooms but never left school until palanquins arrived to drop pupils. Her improvement of the reputation of Victoria Girls' School is measured by an increase in the number of palanquins employed to transport the daughters of *ashraf* families (Begum *Majmua* 181). Muḥammadi's biography includes Ashrafunnisa's compliance with the rules of purdah to show that women's entry into public educational institutions does not compromise on practices most cherished by the elite sections of Indian society. This narrative also emphasises the simplicity of her life. That she was not drawn towards the delicacies of expensive dishes and fine clothes is presented as an important trait of her character. Her attire was in accordance with the traditional mode of living (*qadīm vaz'a*), her jewellery native, and her sandals Indian. As per the testimony of one of her students, she kept wearing *ārsī* for many years for religious reasons, a small ring worn in place of stone in a thumb-ring (pp. 185–86). A glowing tribute is paid to her housekeeping skill. This biographical account also includes sections on her benevolent attitude and acts of charity.

In "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question", Partha Chatterjee argued that in the spiritual/material, the inner/outer, and the home/the world dichotomies created by the nationalist ideology in late nineteenth-century India, women were made the guardian of the spiritual quality of the national culture located in the home. However, this ideology permitted women to venture into the world outside domestic boundaries provided it did not jeopardise her 'femininity'. The flexibility of nationalist discourse is apparent in its redrawing of the boundaries of the home from the rigid and physical confinement of seclusion to a more adjustable domain constituted by the differences between socially acceptable male and female behaviour. After anchoring the essential 'femininity' of women in certain kind of 'spiritual' qualities, women were permitted entry in the public sphere. Once the 'spiritual' markers of her femininity were clearly defined with regard to her sartorial, culinary, and religious practices, she could "go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programmes, and in time even take up employment outside the home." These spiritual attributes of self-sacrifice and religiosity created conditions that ensured the protection of her femininity when she entered the world (Chatterjee 325–327).

Instead of interpreting Ashrafunnisa's strict observance of purdah as the spiritual attribute of nationalist ideology, it can be understood with reference to the changing identity of Muslim community in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century colonial India. Social, political, and economic changes in that period contributed to a consolidation of Muslim community. The numerical strength of the community was emphasised to gain political advantages from the colonial regime, subordinating women's issues to the interests of the larger community. The communalization of Indian politics and Muslim separatism led to the emergence of a conservatist attitude within Indian Muslims with regard to certain customs and practices considered essential for preserving the cohesion of the community (Lateef 16–18, 80). Although Ashrafunnisa's

life appears to be governed by the strictures of patriarchal expectations, she does come across as a strong woman. It appears that her biographer took immense pain to mute her departures from established gender norms of her time, probably a strategy adopted by her as a means of negotiating with patriarchal pressures.

Portrayal of Women's Sufferings and the Nobility of Indian Women

A note of dirge pervades Ashrafunnisa's biographical account especially in the sections in which her mourning for the deaths of her mother, father, husband, daughters, and son are described. According to the testimony of one of her students, tears would roll down her cheeks even when she taught. The portrayal of the sufferings of Indian woman as an essential component of her nobility is related to the question of agency. The presence of the ingredients of sentimentality in this biography is somewhat similar to the consistent depiction by Rāshidul Ḳhairī (1868-1936) of the tragic fate of Indian women in his fiction, which earned him the title of *muṣavvir-e ḡham*. His early novels *Ḥayāt-e Ṣāleḥā* (The Life of Ṣāleḥā) and *Manāzil-us Sāirā* (Stages of Journey) were published between 1902 and 1905 (Minault 131). *Ḥayāt-e Ṣāleḥā* is the tragic tale of a dutiful daughter Ṣāleḥā, whose uncomplaining endurance of her step-mother's tortures and endless sufferings and death in an incompatible marriage present her as a victim of injustice. Ḳhairī's admiration for Indian women's patient endurance of calamities, the strength and nobility of their character are detectable in his oeuvre. His portrayal of the miseries of the gentle, noble, and pious Indian woman verges on a glorification of their sufferings. There is an emphasis on their helplessness which is inextricably linked with his advocacy of the restoration of women's rights by men (Suhrawardy 86-90). However, the incessant laments of a widow in Muḥammadi's account are not aimed at foregrounding her powerlessness as was represented in the moving testimony of a dying widow and her miserable plight in Naẓīr Aḥmad's Urdu novel *Ayāmā* (1891). Neither does the catalogue of personal losses Ashrafunnisa copes with emphasise the transience of earthly existence and a consequent sense of resignation. By highlighting the tragic chapter of her life, this narrative technique stresses her resoluteness, resilience, and the spirit of perseverance.

Conclusion

Ashrafunnisa's auto/biography is an important text that documents the resistance put up by Muslim women in South Asia and their appropriation of education as a tool to battle the conditions that demanded capitulation. It is a story of a Muslim widow's negotiations with the contending demands of respectability and economic hardship. The spirit of perseverance and resoluteness that marks her rise to the position of a headteacher is a fit material for a female bildungsroman. Her transcendence of the reformist discourse on women's education is a prominent feature of this auto/biography. *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf* expands the scope of biography to include Ashrafunnisa's contribution to the cause of women's education in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century North India. It is a biographical memorial raised for a working woman who became a model for the new generation of South Asian Muslim women.

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Notes

- ¹ *Tabaqat* is a genre of biographical literature that emerged in the period of early hadith criticism (eight-century AD) and included assessment of the personal, intellectual, and religious aspects of hadith transmitters. Hadith criticism deals primarily with the chain of hadith transmission in order to establish their authenticity. *Tazkirah* refers to a collection of biographical notes, memoirs or remembrances.
- ² *Mujre-salām*: Short benedictory poems that honour the Prophet Muḥammad and his family.

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Two Cheers for Colonial Modernity: Reading Societal Double-Standard and Assertive Femininity in Manada Devi's *Shikshita Potitar Atmochorit*

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Abstract: Memoirs, through dealing with the writers' personal memories, also bring to the fore the particular social, political, ethical, religious history of a time where the character(s) of the memoirs belong to. Manada Devi, an early 19th century educated woman from a respectable Bengali upper class family, wrote her memoir *Shikshita Potitar Atmochorit* (1929) in Bengali, (translated as *An Educated Woman in Prostitution: A Memoir of Lust, Exploitation, Deceit* in 2021 by Arunava Sinha) that focuses on the condition of women in the backdrop of the contemporary social, political and moral situation of colonial Bengal. The personal memory and the collective memory are interwoven in a texture which reveals the imperative conditions that lead the protagonist 'on the road to sin'. The present paper attempts to examine the patriarchal double-standard and hypocritical liberalism that affects the condition of women across class and caste in the early 19th century Bengal. How different locations, various experiences shape the identity of Manada Devi and how she ends up being 'an educated woman in prostitution' and a witness to the 'real society', as she calls it, will be dealt in detail. Efforts will also be made to highlight the assertive femininity of Manada Devi and her journey to female empowerment which eventually carves a niche of her own identity.

Keywords: Autobiography, Manada Devi, patriarchy, female empowerment, colonial modernity

Two cheers are quite enough: There is no occasion to give three.

– E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy*

In his book *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative* (2007), Thomas Larson points out, 'A memoir sounds like a dalliance; there's something purely personal and time-bound about it, like a fall fashion or passing clouds. [...] the memoir feels prey to (or is it desirous of?) immediate emotional memory, almost as if the point is to preserve the evanescent.' (Larson 18) Memoir has obvious sociological implications since it focuses on the times 'in which life is lived and the significant others of the memoirist's world' (Buss in Eakin 68). The present discussion will see and show how in her memoir *Shikshita Potitar Atmochorit* (1929), originally written in Bangla and later translated as *An Educated Woman in Prostitution: A Memoir of Lust, Exploitation, Deceit* in 2021 by Arunava Sinha, Manada Devi negotiates her individual self with the larger society of the early 20th century Bengal.

There is no denying to the fact that in colonial India, women's autobiographical-writing was an offshoot of Western literary and cultural traditions. Indrani Sen, while commenting on the lives of late 19th and early 20th centuries women with particular reference to *The Memoirs of Haimabati Sen*, rightly argues that women's life-writing was a 'legacy of "colonial modernity", social reform, and in particular, the movement for female education,' and 'was interlinked with western notion of individualism' (Sen 55). In fact, the idea of self-hood or subjectivity, as Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha

comment, 'cannot be separated from the specific historical and political conjunctures that constituted their world.' (Tharu 153) Female subjectivity and female agency predominates the narrative of Manada Devi as she asserts herself through different stages of her life while summarising the significant people and events in her life. Before Manada Devi, we have autobiographies written by Bengali women such as Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* (1876) which, however, in no way challenges the existing patriarchal social structure or questions the hypocrisy and double moral standard as does Manada Devi's narrative.

Time and again, researchers have expressed doubts over the existence of any 'actual' Manada Devi and argue that it might be a figment of imagination. Whether the person is authentic or fabricated, the memoir remains an important historical and sociological document. It gives a nuanced understanding of the prostitution in colonial Bengal because here a prostitute writes her own life narrative. Arunava Sinha, the translator of the memoir, opines that the figure (Manada Devi) is 'a composite of many women who went through similar, harrowing experiences' (*AEWP* 138). The singularity of the memoir lies in the fact that the memoirist does not shy away from talking about such subject matters (like women's sexual desire, their rights etc.) which are always denigrated. As such, the memoir becomes a testimony to a particular period:

The individual incidents as well as the social and psychological commentary are faithful to real life in this period, offering an unusual perspective on a period in which the quest for freedom, progressive ideas and personal education are often considered to have been the drivers of individual and social behaviour. That the sexual instinct intersected with this arc is of particular interest. Indeed, the writer does not claim immunity from it, chastising herself for her moral choices and yet acknowledging that she was unable to resist physical desire. (*AEWP* 139)

Manada Devi, as her memoir claims, was an educated woman from a respectable Bengali upper class family. Her life narrative focuses on the significant events and people in her life that ultimately led her 'on the road to sin' as she herself calls it. Though Binodini Dasi's *Amar Katha* ('My Story', 1912) was purportedly the first autobiographical account written by a prostitute in Bengal, Manada Devi's memoir *Shikshita Potitar Atmochorit* (1929) or *An Educated Woman in Prostitution: A Memoir of Lust, Exploitation, Deceit* (2021) is significant in its own way particularly because of the juxtaposition of the two words 'educated' and 'prostitution' and the transformation ('becoming') of the central character from a daughter of a respectable Brahmin family to a prostitute. Prior to Manada Devi, we have Nabinkali Devi (a daughter of an influential Brahmin by birth and prostitute in later life), who in the preface to her erotic poem, gave a very sketchy account of her life story which follows the route of adultery, social ostracism/desertion and prostitution. Manada Devi's memoir, however, deals with various stages of her life in detail. It consists of chapters clearly denoting the different stages of her life in almost chronological order. As such, the very naming of the chapters indicates the trajectory of her life which is nothing but a series of causative events. Chapter-1 namely 'In Childhood' (*Balye*) offers the account of her birth, parentage, early education etc.. Chapter-2 titled 'In Adolescence' (*Koishore*) depicts various emotional, physical changes in the adolescent girl which she had to cope up with all alone since she did not get regular company of her father anymore after the latter's remarriage. 'Running Away' (*Polayan*), that is Chapter-3, deals with the adolescent girl's elopement with Rameshda, a distant cousin, followed by gradual realisation of her mistake (dealt in the following Chapter aptly named 'Realising My Mistake' or *Bhul Bhangilo*). Chapter-5, 'On the Road to Sin' (*Paap er Pathe*), talks about her distressful condition followed by her desertion by the cousin (Rameshda) and finally her entry into the world's oldest profession elaborately discussed in the next chapter 'Selling My Body' (*Deho Bikroi*). Chapter- 7 'The Social Canvas' (*Samaj Chitra*) is significant in the sense that it focuses on the gendered society and its hypocrisy. It also brings to light the contemporary literary scene and its portrayal of 'fallen' women. Chapter-8 'Playing with Fire' (*Agni Krira*), tells us about the impact of various contemporary political movements like Gandhi's non-cooperation in Bengal. It gives us a glimpse about the reformation programmes led by

Deshbandhu Chittaranjan and the ilk. The chapter also brings to the fore the participation of Bengali women in these social and political movements. 'Vortex of Filth' (*Pankil Aborte*), Chapter-9, focuses on the distressful condition of women in the domestic sphere due to malicious in-laws. Last three chapters of the memoir zoom in on the life of the aged prostitute who, now remorseful, reflects on the 'sinful' life she led and finally decided to donate all her wealth to the cause of the 'fallen' women and other lower strata people.

If we concentrate on the very title of the memoir ('An Educated Woman in Prostitution'), it appears quite oxymoronic particularly at the backdrop of 19th century Bengal since education was not so common for women at that time. The subtitle ('A Memoir of Lust, Exploitation, Deceit') provided by the translator clearly maps the trajectory of Manada Devi's life. While the word 'educated' from the title of the memoir gives the women writer some agency to speak about her life, the word 'prostitution' robs her of 'respectability'. Interestingly, however, Manada Devi proclaims herself as 'Kumari Srimati Manada Devi' (in the original Bengali version). The sobriquet 'Kumari' both designates unmarried and supposedly virgin while Srimati is a respectable title written before the name of women in India. Thus, Manada Devi defies social categorisation by writing her name as 'Kumari Srimati Manada Devi'. Furthermore, no woman is 'born' a prostitute, rather 'becomes' a prostitute as Simon de Beauvoir would say; in Manada Devi's case, her transformation from an educated woman from a 'respectable' household to a prostitute under certain circumstances raises issues like hypocrisy of society towards 'fallen' women. In fact, as Sutanuka Ghosh posits, 'the term 'becoming' indicates that the 'self' is not a finished or stable product and is continually undergoing a dynamic process of change, even transformation. 'Becoming' also suggests the ongoing agency of the subject, even when operating under circumstantial or other constraints.' (Ghosh 107) The very 'wounds' become her 'power' when the body becomes a site of contestation between self and society. She vehemently attacks the double-standard of patriarchy and affirms to expose the hypocrites of the society who despite being lustful assumes the mask of gentlemen while the women they enjoy are considered to be doomed. Her singularity lies in the fact that she never concealed her real identity in the memoir, even expresses her desire to publish her photograph along with her memoir. She published it in her life time and appended her counter responses to the criticism of the readers and critics in subsequent edition(s) of the book. It was a radical step for a woman of early 20th century Bengal to publicly proclaim her identity as a prostitute and vindicating her rights to live her life on her own terms defying the codes and conventions of the society. No doubt that the memoir got immediate attention after its publication. Regarding the book's reception, Sandip Bandyopadhyay mentions the copy of the advertisement published on the periodical "Shanti" from Dhaka which says: 'The book has created a great flutter in Bengali society. It offers you an insight into the root of the social malady and exposes the hypocrisy of the custodians of society — leaders, lawyers, professors — Who all patronise this loathsome profession. The book has run into 3 editions in 3 months.' (Bandyopadhyay 21)

In the advertisement written for the second edition (attached with the Bengali version), Manada Devi asks for equal rights for women and criticises the double-standard of patriarchal society. She even raises her voice for the representation of prostitutes in the election. If we remember the time when she is writing, this appears to be pretty astonishing and revolutionary too.

First chapter 'In Childhood' (*Balye*), as the title suggests, begins with the account of her birth and parentage:

I WAS BORN ON THE 18th of Ashadh in the year 1307 (1900 on the Gregorian calendar). My father was a Brahmin man from a respectable family, and I was his first child. I am unable to disclose his name and family background, for many of his offspring, close relatives and other members of the extended family are alive. Their social standing is not insignificant, and this memoir might come into their possession. I have no desire to disconcert them. (*AEWP* 3)

Manada Devi made it very clear in her life-narrative that she was not neglected by her parents for being a girl child; thanks to the 'colonial modernity' and several social reforms of the period. She was

admitted at Bethune School and studied there up to sixth standard. Hers, as she herself claims, was a happy childhood until her mother died. The death of her mother brought one noticeable change in her academic life. She was 'withdrawn' from the school and a tutor was appointed to take care of her education at home. However, she claims, her education was not hampered by this change. The significant change in her early life happened when her father brought home a stepmother only one year older than her and the adolescent girl (Manada Devi) was not given the due attention and care she needed. Manada Devi ruefully recalls her father's indifference and neglect:

I no longer met him [his father] for any reason other than specific requirements. Earlier, he would enquire after my studies, and sit by me to listen to me sing, but not any longer. I did not accompany him and my stepmother when they went to the theatre; I went to the bioscope with Nanda-dada instead. [...] My father took my stepmother on a holiday, accompanied only by a pair of servants. I was eager to go too, but I could not bring myself to tell him this, for it was obvious well beforehand that he had no intention of taking me along. I was deeply hurt. Neither my father nor my stepmother wrote to me from their travels; (*AEWP* 13-16)

The negligence and indifference of the father or any such elderly person was definitely one of the reasons behind the adolescent girl taking the wrong path. We get ample references to the writer's sexual awakening and need for love and guidance: 'I had experienced my sexual awakening. In the absence of a watchful guardian, I realised only too well that an unfriendly wind was blowing in, fanning my proclivities. I even used to be desirous of marriage.' (*AEWP* 21) If the daughters' physical and mental needs were taken care of at the right time, as Manada Devi in her later life ruminates, the damage could be averted: 'Today I feel that suitable guardianship would have done me a world of good;' (*AEWP* 34).

Her first sexual experience made her more bold and fearless: 'I was like a wild tiger who had tasted blood for the first time. There was no fear or repentance—on the contrary, my anxiety and hesitation disappeared. [...] Six or seven months passed, while I kept adding fuel to the fire of nature.' (*AEWP* 30) Manada Devi admits the urgency of her 'desires' which led her to leave the house with her distant cousin Ramesh: 'It was because I was deluded by desire and had taken leave of my senses.' (*AEWP* 33) However, she was later deserted by the cousin and being all alone (since her father was not ready to reclaim her), she ultimately chose the world's oldest profession. As such, Manada Devi was victim to the 'the elopement-desertion syndrome' (Bandyopadhyay 723) which Aparna Bandyopadhyay argues, 'was a significant factor to prostitution even in the early decades of the twentieth century' (Bandyopadhyay 723). Bandyopadhyay, in her article, refers Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, the then Deputy Magistrate of Murshidabad and the novelist, who found, 'seduction by unprincipled villains who seduced women from their households, often leaving them to their fate, after their novelty wore off' was one of the principal factors that led women to embrace prostitution (Chattopadhyay in Bandyopadhyay 724). The inequality inherent in gender relations comes to the fore because the male figure, the seducer, remains unnoticed and gets scot-free.

While the memoir reflects on personal experiences and encounters, it also brings to the fore the picture of contemporary society. In fact, personal narrative and historical narrative move parallel. They crisscross and form the unique texture of the memoir. In various stages of her life, Manada Devi has experienced the hypocrisy and double standard of patriarchy. The double-standard of the father-figure comes to the fore when he discards the proposal of her daughter's marriage on the grounds of her age when he himself married a woman almost of the same age as his daughter. While deserted by Ramesh and forsaken by family, she vents out her feelings of being wronged as a woman in society to the 'mahant':

I am a grave sinner, babaji, society has no place for me, my father has forsaken me. But you know of the men who have sold their honour and prestige, their wealth and assets, their bodies and their souls, at the feet of women like me, look, society has given them the choicest of positions. They are extolled as poets and writers, renowned as politicians and patriots, respected as the rich and the noble. There are

even some sages and priests who have become gurus to the populace, about whom society maintains a studied silence. [...] This is how your society metes out justice. (*AEWP* 54)

The question of injustice surfaces again and again in her criticism of patriarchal society:

A woman, when she becomes fallen, seems to have lost all her value. Even if one insults her, one cannot be held on charges of defamation by law. But the same law allows (defamation charges) in the case of a 'fallen' man. Why? Because the law has been framed by men.... Why don't those in the Congress council who demand equal rights for men and women press for a solution (to this) at the legislative council? ... In the event of none putting up this demand at the coming council session, we would be forced to conclude that all those who clamour for equal rights are sheer liars. Either fulfil our demand or expel the fallen men from the council and such other bodies." (*AEWP* 140)

Rani Mashi's commentary on society also indicates the 'fallen' nature of society: 'It is not just we women who have fallen—all of society has gone the same way.' (*AEWP* 69) The case of Aparajita Devi, as mentioned by Manada Devi in the memoir, is an instance where the wife is asked by the husband's aunt to 'sale' her 'chastity' to earn for the family and upon denial was led to torture and death. She was the third person in the family to face such fate because she was the third wife of her husband and the previous two wives met the same fate. By mentioning such incidents of society, the memoir brings into light the 'fallen' nature of society: 'Are the custodians of the society aware that such tragic things are now taking place in almost every family? Society is going astray. The miscreants who can buy prestige for money go about scot free.' (*AEWP* 110)

Manada Devi's memoir makes an important observation on the contemporary literary scene also. She comments on the gradual changes in the portrayal of prostitutes in the contemporary literature:

An epochal change was coming over literature at the time, which I will discuss briefly because of its close relationship with the lives of prostituted women. The image that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and his contemporaries drew of the adulteress reinforced nothing but hatred. [...] But after this, Rabindranath Tagore revealed a different aspect of the character of the adulteress, which makes us sympathetic. And what he kept unclear was revealed openly by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Naresh Chandra Sengupta, and other young writers, ensuring that people could still be attracted to such women. They said, 'Prostituted women may not be pure, but they are not devoid of human ideals. Considering that the fallen woman can be simple at heart, spiritual, god fearing, compassionate and generous, why does she have to an object of scorn? The fault lies with society, not with the woman.' (*AEWP* 81-82)

This attitude of questioning the 'fault' of society makes Manada Devi a radical feminist figure, who, through her life story, highlights the multiple marginalisation of women in postcolonial patriarchal societal structure. The acceptability of Manada Devi and other 'fallen' women and the 'respectable' woman figures like Basanti Devi ('Deshbandhu' Chittaranjan Das' wife), Urmila Devi, Suniti Devi and the ilk were not the same in the society even when they participated in and contributed to the same social and political cause of the society.

The memoir contains a series of interesting reflections on Bengali society of the times. A significant part of the book is devoted to the description of the prostitutes' participation in social activities like the non-cooperation movement in the early twentieth century. The author fondly remembers, 'The enthusiasm over noncooperation was such that while working together (with educated youths) we could hardly feel that we were despicable prostitutes and they young men of the educated gentry. Those young workers also did not mind working along with fallen women (barbanitas).' (*AEWP* 89) Their entry into public work was marked by raising funds for the east Bengal cyclone victims in 1919 which they later donated to the respected Chittaranjan Das. This kind of community work gave them a sense of self-respect and prepared them for newer and bigger enterprise:

We, some of the patita women, formed a small group. Our customers would help us with suggestions and encouragement. Formerly, while collecting funds for the east Bengal cyclone victims, we had chanced to mix with the bhadralok people. This had added to our courage, smartness and ability. We

had got acquainted with many leaders of the country. This time, when we again joined public work, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan's associates were very happy and they would help us in many ways. (*AEWP* 88-89)

However, this picture of social acceptance does not reflect the true picture of contemporary society. Manada Devi shows us both sides of the coin— acceptance and non-acceptance of prostitutes by the society. While people like Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das welcomed people across class and caste and gender (including prostitutes) in the Swadeshi movement, Brahma Samaj, the so-called enlightened religion, was not ready to accept prostitutes as their members: 'And look at the state of the Brahmo Samaj now. The other day we went there to join them voluntarily, but they did not accept us. Someone named Heramba-babu (later I learnt his name was Herambachandra Maitra) dismissed us as bad women and did not even allow us to touch his feet in respect.' (*AEWP* 71)

We come across Gandhiji's 'intolerance' towards the prostitutes when he purportedly kept prostitutes and criminal in the same bracket: 'During Mahatma Gandhi's tour of Bengal, he was invited to a gathering by the association of women in prostitution in Barishal. But he did not attend it, saying that if such women were to form associations, so would criminals.' (*AEWP* 100-101) Thus, Manada Devi's narrative challenges the reformist discourse on women's upliftment in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Bengal and brings to the fore the heterogeneity in women's condition in any society.

Throughout the ages, it has always been tough for the women to establish their individual identities; and indeed tougher for a 'fallen' woman to vindicate her own rights to live her life according to her choice. Despite different trials and tribulations in life, Manada Devi succeeds to express an assertive femininity and her journey to female empowerment eventually carves a niche of her own identity. She questions the sexual double standard in society and calls for gender equality. She argues that if there are 'fallen woman', there must be 'fallen man' too but unlike women, they don't have to bear any social disgrace.

In fine, Manada Devi's memoir is one of a kind in the history of life-narratives written by 'an educated woman in prostitution' in the early 20th century Bengal. It becomes a testament of the collective condition of women in the backdrop of the contemporary social, political and moral situation of colonial Bengal highlighting the patriarchal double-standard and the hypocritical liberalism that affected the condition of women across class and caste in colonial Bengal. It brings light on the lives of prostitutes in contemporary society— their participation in contemporary Swadeshi movement, non-acceptance of the prostitutes by so called reformers etc.. Of course, in the usual sense of the term, we cannot term Manada Devi's memoir as a feminist manifesto since there are many ambivalences and/ or limitations in Manada Devi's outlook. For example, she argues for child marriage: 'Since nature has decreed that women feel desire at the age of fourteen, it is best for them to be married before that.' (*AEWP* 136) She is apprehensive of the 'free-mingling' of girls and boys in schools and is critical of theatres and fiction/ romances because, she believes, they fuel the sensual 'desires' and bring downfall. Needless to say, she develops this kind of apprehension and opinion out of her own personal experiences. Finally, despite certain limitations, the book shows serious concerns for the women's cause and empowerment. It showcases how body becomes an empowered site too. It also foregrounds how the 'personal' becomes 'political' underlining the connections between personal experience(s) and larger social and political structures. Thus, the memoir is a landmark in the history of life-narratives by an early 20th century woman who stood tall for constructing a distinct female subjectivity and for her honest utterances of the 'wrongs' she suffered and the 'rights' she exercised throughout her life to carve a niche for herself.

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Narrating Lives: The Devadasi and Her Art

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Abstract: The reform movements in South India had the question of the devadasi quite centrally located within its discourse. The devadasi was seen as all evil and hence had to be removed from the society. At the same time, the art itself had to be saved. Hence, the most feasible option was to distance the art form from the practitioners, thereby rendering them impoverished. This would also move the art form out of the “monopoly” of the hereditary families. Being criminalised by the law, many practitioners were engaged in the teaching of the art forms to people from outside the community. This in a sense made art more acceptable, whereby children of “respectable” communities would not only learn dance but also take it up as their profession; at the same time, it took the art form away from the original practitioners. The aim of this paper will be to trace the effects of the anti-nautch movement, the revival of dance and the abolition of the devadasi system on the life of the practitioners from within the community. It will discuss the lives of four women, (via biographical narratives), all belonging to the devadasi community, and how they negotiated their identities, and art amidst the changing attitude of the society towards dance and music- Veena Dhanamma (1869-1938), Bangalore Nagarathnamma (1878-1952), M.S. Subbulakshmi (1916-2004) and T. Balasaraswati (1918-1984).

Keywords: Devadasi, nautch, reform movements, dance, music

The issue of devadasi reform was embedded in larger public debates about sexuality in colonial India....National imaginaries and identities, inflected by class and caste anxieties, undoubtedly hinged upon constructions of gender, and specifically on the control and regulation of female sexuality. Reform projects around the devadasis also represented a persistent, middle class altruism that was justified through the discourse of moral recuperation. Nonconjugal female sexuality represented a near-irrevocable moral degeneration, and it was in large part responsibility of middle-class women to reform and neutralize its dangers by way of example. (Soneji 112-113)

The question of the devadasi was integral to the reformist movements in South India. The institution was seen as sanctioned prostitution under the garb of religion, and hence faced severe criticism in and around the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Christian Missionaries and the reform movements in Southern India took it upon themselves to reform the Indian society, which they felt had no moral principles. The practice of the nautch came under serious scrutiny because of the attached moral stigma. This led to the anti-nautch movement which began in Madras in 1892. The movement was started by the Madras Christian Literary Association, which was led by Rev. J. Murdoch. He termed the devadasis as “repulsive and immoral” and put both accomplished dancers and common prostitutes on the same platform. They were also accused of impoverishing and ruining their patrons. A nautch performance was held for the welcome of the Prince of Wales in 1875. However, there was a huge outcry on the proposition of organising a nautch performance during the visit of Prince Albert Victor in 1890. This crusade against the nautch performance was led by Rev. J. Murdoch who later went on to publish extensively on Indian social reforms. In a pamphlet issued by The Christian Society, Madras, titled, “Nautch Women: An Appeal to English

Ladies on Behalf of Their Indian Sisters” brought out in 1893, the Christian Society advised the British ladies not to attend these parties and also prevent their men from doing so. Another pamphlet, “Nautch—An Appeal to Educated Hindus” dealt with the evils associated with the nautch such as loss of money, disease, bodily weakness, bad influence on one’s character, etc. The only solution provided for the improvement of the society was the abolition of the system. Social Reformers from England took it upon themselves to persuade educated Indians from boycotting these performances. Miss Tennant and Mrs. Marcus Fullers, two of the most influential amongst them, condemned the dedication of girls to temples. Mrs. Fullers, the wife of a missionary in Bombay wrote in her book, *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*: “We are convinced that if the highest officials in India were to refuse to attend nautches on moral grounds, their action would be an object lesson in moral education to the whole country. Hindu hosts would soon be ashamed and drop the nautch from the programs of their public entertainments” (Chakravorty 44).

Under the able guidance of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, the anti-nautch movement gathered momentum and the devadasi institution was finally banned. In her resolution titled, “Why should the Devadasi Institution in the Hindu Temples be Abolished?” she talks about the practice of dedicating girls or young women to temples as a slur on Indian womanhood and a great wrong done to the youth of the country. She advocates the abolition of the devadasi system and suggests that they should be given some land so that they could lead a life of respect thereafter. She blames the temple, religion and people for this “immoral practice”, for forcing children into the profession in the name of religion. In her *Autobiography* and *My Experiences as a Legislator*, she mentions the need for the abolition of the system which is full of vice and is morally degrading. Emphasising the moral, psychological and medical consequences, she proves the need for the abolition of the system. Muthulakshmi Reddi managed to get the resolution passed in the legislative assembly and the devadasi system was eventually banned in 1947.

The devadasi was seen as all evil and hence had to be removed from the society. At the same time, the art itself had to be saved. Hence, the most feasible option was to distance the art form from the practitioners, thereby rendering them impoverished. This would also move the art form out of the “monopoly” of the hereditary families. Being criminalised by the law, many practitioners were engaged in the teaching of the art forms to people from outside the community. This in a sense made art more acceptable, whereby children of “respectable” communities would not only learn dance but also take it up as their profession; at the same time, it took the art form away from the original practitioners. The aim of this paper will be to trace the effects of the anti-nautch movement, the revival of dance and the abolition of the devadasi system on the life of the practitioners from within the community. It will discuss the lives of four women, (via biographical narratives), all belonging to the devadasi community, and how they negotiated their identities, and art amidst the changing attitude of the society towards dance and music. The paper deals with the lives of Veena Dhanammal (1869-1938), Bangalore Nagarathnamma (1878-1952), M. S. Subbulakshmi (1916-2004) and T. Balasaraswati (1918-1984).

A Performer in the Private Sphere: Veena Dhanammal

Her singing is straightforward and mind capturing. There is scholarship and a sparkling quality in her swarakalpana but they do not wipe away the sweetness. Graceful and pleasant playing of the veena is complementary to her sweet voice. —Gurajada Appa Rao. (Subramanian 45)

Veena Dhanammal was born in Georgetown, a suburb of Madras, which was known as the housing place of the devadasi community. Her family was attached to the court of Tanjore. According to Lakshmi Subramanian, a prominent historian, who has researched extensively on Carnatic music: “Proximity to the city’s [Madras] cultural elite helped in her interactions with some remarkable composers and poets through whom she was able to develop a set of distinct ideas about the genre of padams, love songs which were traditionally associated with ritual music” (Subramanian *Tanjore*

Court xxviii). Dhanammal was one artist who performed mainly in the private sphere. She performed every Friday at her house, on Ramakrishna Street, which could accommodate a maximum of fifteen people. Most of the people who came for her Friday night soirees were her patrons and admirers, generally the elite. It was a very select audience that she played for. She enjoyed enormous prestige among the royalty of South India, which included Mysore, Tanjore, Travancore and Madras among others. She kept alive the salon culture in Madras which was in contrast to the emerging trend of public performances by upcoming artists.

The eighteenth century saw the emergence of the Trinity of composers, Tyagaraja, Muthusvami Dikhsitar and Syama Sastri:

The emergence of these composers has to be understood in the context of devotional and musical activity in the temple city where, for more than two centuries, a substantial corpus of music scholarship and performance had been consolidated under the patronage of the ruling court... as some scholars have suggested, this (the court taking interest in music and the issue of patronage) was part of the growing Brahminisation of musical culture in the region (Subramanian *Tanjore Court* 5).

There was sudden interest in pursuing music which came about after the emergence of this Trinity, whose compositions were immensely popular: "...there was a growing interest in pursuing music, not as a profession or traditional occupation but as a personal passion that lay outside one's professional pursuits" (Subramanian *Tanjore* 10). However, there was the tendency to distance the devadasis, the community which had so long performed both the music and the dance forms, owing to a newly developed moral sensibility. In spite of all this, Dhanammal still had immense popularity between 1900 and 1920.

Dhanammal played the veena as she sang, and hence was better known as Veena Dhanammal. As Lakshmi Subramanian mentions in her biography of the artist, Dhanammal had a lot of contempt for certain mannerisms that she identified as male and coarse and for the inability of the male singers to sing *padams* and *javalis*. She was dismissive of the display of complex rhythmic control. It is this simplicity that made her different from the others and added to the fact that her popularity hardly diminished during her performing years. Dhanammal also believed in lineage. She believed that art should be passed on from one generation to another. Her ancestors were performers at the court of Tanjore; she herself was trained in *abhinaya*, and as a result she made sure that she personally trained her next generation. She is even believed to have taken a fee for the training imparted, to bring in professionalism. This has stark resemblance to the *guru shishya parampara* in North India, except for the fact that it was strictly patriarchal, while Dhanammal's tutelage took place in a matrilineal set up. It is from this tradition that we see the emergence of T. Balasaraswati, Dhanammal's granddaughter, who in her address at the Madras Music Academy says: "[I]t was Veena Dhanam who outlined to me the repertoire of padas and presented their scope... My interpretation of the padam then depends on Dhanammal's interpretation of all her music and not just the padas. She set an ideal of richness and subtlety of emotions, expression that shines like a lamp before those who have heard and appreciated her music" (Subramanian *Veena* 103).

Dhanammal, however, spent her last few days in penury, and stayed reclusive, performing only for a select few. She hardly ever performed at bigger concerts. She refused to be part of the "classical" mission of the new emerging society, which projected the 'ideal' performer as one who performed compositions of the Trinity and within the public space, for behind this project was the desire to gain respectability for the art form in the public domain. Recognition for Dhanammal also came in after her death: "Was there something in her music that made it accessible only to an intimate and interiorised circle of admirers who shared a personal bond with the artist and the music she embodied and conveyed which was not possible in a larger concert space?" (Subramanian *Veena* 91). Dhanammal believed in possessing a distinct style and the concept of a lineage, something that Bangalore Nagarathnamma strongly believed in as well. In and around 1927, Dhanammal and Nagarathnamma collaborated a lot with regard to the emerging anti-naught movement that was being spearheaded by Muthulakshmi Reddy.

The Struggles of Bangalore Nagarathnamma

Bangalore Nagarathnamma's mother, a devadasi, was attached to the temple of Nanjangud. Few years after the birth of Nagarathnamma, her mother had fallen off from her patron. She and her daughter were then taken by Giribhatta Thimayya, a Sanskrit scholar, musician and an instructor at the Shakuntala Nataka Sabha. It was under his tutelage that Nagarathnamma began her training. Nagarathnamma's mother, Putta Lakshmi, realised that getting her daughter to be a court dancer was not going to be an easy task. After a fall out with Thimayya, she moved to Bangalore, and started preparing Nagarathnamma to be a court dancer. She was taught music, dance, the violin and was also made to study languages like Telugu, Kannada and English. Though her mother passed away soon, after 1893, Nagarathnamma acquired the stature and recognition that her mother had desired for her.

There are three high points of Nagarathnamma's life, which are of relevance and which I will focus on in this section. First, the *Radhika Santwanam* episode, second, the campaign against the anti-nautch and third, the shrine that she helped build in Tiruvayyaru. *Radhika Santwanam* written by Muddupalani, a courtesan in the court of Pratapasimha, deals with the jealousy of Radha when she is unable to accept the union between Krishna and Ila, her niece. It culminates in Krishna coming to Radha to please her. As Sriram. V, her biographer and a music historian, mentions:

The work had probably been first noticed in the modern times by Charles Philip Brown, the renowned Orientalist scholar and lexicographer. Who had while leaving India in 1855 left behind a collection of manuscripts ready for printing at the Madras Manuscripts Library.... the work was published in 1887 and later in 1907 by ...an associate of Brown. It had also received attention of sorts from Viresalingam... the Andhra reformer... a staunch supporter of the Anti-Nautch movement.... on the work itself, while commending the style and the ideal admixture of Sanskrit and Telugu in it, Viresalingam claimed to be shocked by its content. Having denounced Muddupalani as an adultress, he declared that the shamelessness of the work was not surprising as it was written by a prostitute. (Sriram 38)

Nagarathnamma decided to republish the text, with a prologue indicating the reasons behind doing so, as some errors had crept in the circulating edition and some of the passages had been deleted. Being a devadasi herself, she felt the need to bring the literary work into limelight and also do away with the claims that Viresalingam had made about Muddupalani.

After the republication of the work, Viresalingam and Nagarathnamma condemned each other. While Viresalingam accused the book of being bereft of any modesty and being filled with graphic, crude descriptions of lovemaking, Nagarathnamma claimed that accusing Muddupalani of adultery was uncalled for, as she should be evaluated on her work and not on her personal life. The book was released in March 1910, and after furious deliberations, where it was accused of obscenity by the purists, called "injurious to public morals", and that everyone who possessed a copy of it was liable under Section 293 of the Indian Penal code, the Government issued a memorandum in September, 1911 mentioning, "that all copies of the book *Radhika Santwanam* should be destroyed as objectionable passages are found on nearly every page of that work" (Sriram 51). The two major reasons why this text was targeted was, one, that it dealt with the erotic, where gender roles had been inverted, that it was written by a courtesan and hence dismissed as being frivolous, and two, that another devadasi had taken up the cause to stand against a renowned figure in the anti-nautch campaign, which was seen as unacceptable. The idea was to distance the courtesan/prostitute from the public domain and publishing a book written by one, which carried a foreword by another, justifying the reason for its republication, would jeopardise the project.

It was in 1921 that Nagarathnamma had a vision about Tyagaraja, followed by a letter from her guru, Bidaram Krishnappa, who lamented to her about the dilapidated state of Tyagaraja's Samadhi. She was pained by the description and thought of the vision as a sign to "begin a life of dedication to his cause" (Sriram 97). When she visited the Samadhi later, she found the neglect towards the Samadhi unacceptable: "She had found her Lord and Master, a deity and a patron rolled into one. She was to refer to herself as a Tyagaraja Dasi from then on" (Sriram 98). She acquired the land by

exchanging it with her own land worth the same value and the construction began in 1921 itself. So long, no women were allowed to worship during the *Aradhana*, an event which was held in commemoration of the composer's passing away in Tiruvayyaru. Nagarathnamma was also refused this honour. Considering she had rebuilt the Samadhi, bearing all the expenses and the fact that she was such an ardent follower of Tyagaraja, this came as an insult. She had made up her mind to begin an *Aradhana* which would be only conducted by women. Hence, she got around 40 devadasis from around the area and they conducted the *Aradhana* together, which was a huge success, thereby ending the male monopoly of the celebrations. This group of women also included all the daughters of Dhanammal, who herself had earlier been denied a performance during *Aradhana*. Nagarathnamma in her own way broke down a system which denied women equal rights and in getting devadasis to perform, she provided them with a platform to showcase their talent and also to give them "an opportunity to offer their tribute to Tyagaraja by means of the music they knew" (Sriram 110).

The anti-naught movement was in full swing through the career of Bangalore Nagarathnamma. Unlike Dhanammal, who faced only bits of it, also because of the fact that she performed essentially in the private space, though she protested against the abolition of the devadasi system, Nagarathnamma was at the forefront of the struggle against this. The anti-naught movement led by Muthulakshmi Reddi thought of the practice of dedicating girls or young women to temples as a slur on Indian womanhood and a great wrong done to the youth of the country. It believed in the need for the abolition of the system which was full of vice and was morally degrading. The Devadasi Association argued in nine individual sections as to why this law should not be passed.¹ "[T]he Association unanimously and emphatically protests against the introduction of the Bill of Dr Muthulakshmi Reddi regarding Devadasis as it affects the ancient customs and usages of the community and specially religion" (Soneji 128) was the response of the Devadasi Association, Madras, when Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced the Bill in the Legislative Council. While in the Legislative Council, members spoke for and against the proposed Bill, the devadasis, led by Nagarathnamma worked on the memorandum, which separated devadasis from common prostitutes, and projected service to God as the main aim of the profession. They agreed that a certain section of them had gone astray, but believed that the entire community should not be held responsible and reprimanded for the same. Such memorandums were passed across the Madras presidency and though the Government acknowledged the receipt of these memorandums, they served no purpose eventually. The Government took time over passing the resolution, more so because it was tampering with religion and the temple. The Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1926, curbed the economic rights of the community, whereby the devadasis had to give away all the land that they had acquired by virtue of the duties at the temples. Once the Act was passed, most of the payments in lieu of the land that was being taken away were not made and many devadasis led their final days in penury, including the likes of Mylapore Gowri Ammal, the renowned dancer, who even taught Rukmini Devi and Balasaraswati. The Bill was passed as Act V in 1929, and devadasis would soon sink into oblivion in a couple of years. There were very few options available to the devadasis after the abolition of the system. The most common among them was to get married and thereby gain social acceptability. Perhaps the greatest example of such a shift of accepted identity was M. S. Subbulakshmi. Born into a devadasi family, Subbulakshmi, grew up to be one of the greatest practitioners of Carnatic music, gaining both social mobility and acceptability.

The Devadasi "wife": M. S. Subbulakshmi

M. S. was born in Madurai in 1916. Her mother was one of the earliest professional veena players. She belonged to the devadasi community. There are no early records of her life. M. S. showed keen interest in music as a child and though her mother did not get her any formal training at an early age, the intrinsic quality of her voice made her mother take her to veena concerts and eventually get her a guru, first, in Madurai, Srinivasa Iyenger and later in Seithur, Sundaresha Bhattar. She showed

immense potential and did her first gramophone recording at the age of 10. Her mother found an appropriate match for her in the family of the rajah of Ramanathapura. But Subbulakshmi refused to get married, and eventually moved to Madras, a move that was not approved by her mother:

The Tamil tradition, which had attached value to the arts of the devadasi, seemed to provide a social foundation, however tenuous, on which the women could now rely. By the end of the nineteenth century it had become socially acceptable for a well-to-do Brahmin to take a devadasi "wife" in addition to his legal Brahmin wife. The second wife was allotted a slot in society, grudgingly perhaps, but a slot nonetheless. The man would support the woman with a reasonable degree of fidelity and she would recognize him as her "husband" to the exclusion of other men. Such a state of affairs would enable her to claim a particular Iyer or Iyenger (the two main South Indian Brahmin sects) as her husband and as father of her child. The man would graciously let her make the claim. Such an acknowledgement undoubtedly reflected a male dominated society's arrangement of convenience, but it did provide the women a measure of dignity in addition to a patina of security. (George 83)

For M. S.'s mother, not having a man in the house did not raise any issues. She had seen a similar situation with her mother and grandmother. She was well reputed as a veena player and earned enough to take care of her children. But after the anti-nautch movement, there was a general perception that devadasi women should be married off to help them gain social acceptability. The youth were encouraged to marry them, even if she were to become the second wife. M. S. married T. Sadasivam in 1940. They stayed together till Sadasivam's death in 1997. At first Subbulakshmi's mother did not approve of the match, for she found a better match for her in a businessman. This proposition prompted Subbulakshmi to leave home and go away to Madras. She landed at Sadasivam's place, who was always ready to help someone in need. He was already married and had two daughters: "He understood the dilemma in which MS was caught... He knew that MS was too inexperienced in the ways of the world to get ahead on her own. The obvious course open to both was for Sadasivam to substitute for her mother. He took up the role with relish, while MS drew comfort from having such a worldly-wise man to turn to" (George 114-115). The fact that M. S. had moved to Madras, with a man who her mother did not approve of, broke her mother down. Later in her life, she was accused of not having taken care of her mother in her good times, of not having reconciled with her. But part of it had to do with the fact that after her marriage not only did she turn completely submissive to her husband, he almost erected a fortress around her with regard to the information that went out to the public arena. He took every decision in her life, whether it was about working in films, or which concert to sing for.

Their marriage was not well received. It was unacceptable for a man to either marry above or below his caste, and Sadasivam had married a devadasi, a non Brahmin. Even after a decade of their wedding, the Kanchi Swamigal objected to M. S. wearing the nine yard saree, as she was not a Brahmin. But soon enough, Sadasivam made sure that the ascetic changed his opinion. He went on to call her "Brindavan tulasi". Sadasivan was determined to wipe away the wife's past: "Orthodox as he was in his Brahmanical ways, he set out to ensure that his wife fitted into his socio-religious hierarchy as an equal and that the Brahmin establishment accepted her as such. He would pursue that goal restlessly; using music and cinema, religion and charity, political connections and social contacts, journalism and every other avenue open to him for the purpose" (152). The personal qualities that Subbulakshmi possessed made her an ideal candidate for this social elevation: "She was self-effacingly devoted to her husband and family, a primary quality in a Brahmin wife....She was unassertive, unobtrusive, orthodox and diffident in a graceful sort of way" (153). Her Sanskrit was impeccable, which made her a part of the Sanskritization process, where, mastery over the language and devotional rituals, could bring you upward mobility. She almost became representative of a class of women who yearned social acceptance through marriage and transformed themselves in the process. Girish Karnad observes that "Subbulakshmi's spectacular career had much to do with the way she managed to shed all traces of her devadasi past and transform herself into the perfect image

of a Tamil Brahmin housewife” (91). Perhaps, Subbulakshmi had realised that this change of status would suit her career and her ambition. She adapted herself very well into this changed status and went on to mesmerize the world with her music for the next few decades.

In contrast to the life of Subbulakshmi is that of Balasaraswati.

The *sringara* of Balasaraswati

By the time of her [Balasaraswati's] dedication, more and more of the traditional community was being absorbed into a new social order that excluded and marginalised matrilineal families to such extremes that the families and their way of life became invisible and seemed to have disappeared. Balasaraswati's choice to live in a manner consistent with the family culture and social order that preceded her, and to remain in the public view at that, was an act of extraordinary courage. She was exemplary of the code of ethics that had for centuries given strength to the devadasi community. (Knight 30)

Following the lineage of Veena Dhanammal, Balasaraswati was one of the finest exponents of Bharatnatyam of her generation. In her biography, written by Douglas Knight, who was married to Balasaraswati's daughter, there is an extensive engagement with both her lineage and her art form. Born in a devadasi community, she had a rich family name to live up to: “Balasaraswati was the last nationally significant performer of Bharatnatyam who was trained and raised in a manner consistent with her antecedents from the devadasi community” (Knight 7). Balasaraswati's ancestors were performers in the court of Tanjore. Her family moved to Madras in the 1860s. The house in which Dhanammal held her Friday night soirees was Balasaraswati's first home.

Bharatnatyam was in the middle of a lot of debate by the turn of the century. The anti-naught movement had given rise to two streams of thought, one, to abolish the dance and the practitioners, and second, to reform and preserve the dance. Balasaraswati's earliest teacher was Mylapore Gowri Ammal. Of her she mentions, “The initial inspiration for me to take up dancing came from seeing performances of Gauri Ammal when I was very young. If this lady had not brought the dance to such a stage of development, the combination of music and dance that I have attempted to realize would not have been possible” (Knight 26). Though dedicating girls to a temple was being advocated against in the 1920s, Balasaraswati's family dedicated her to their family temple in Tanjore, for her mother believed that “it was not the service to a particular temple that was important, but rather the dedication to a life of art” (Knight 28). As I have mentioned earlier, Dhanammal, Balasaraswati's grandmother, strongly believed in the lineage of art being passed on from one generation to another. Balasaraswati's second teacher was Kandappa Pillai, whom she acknowledged as her only guru. A nattuvunar himself, he played the mridangam and sang the padams, till he found a better singer in Jayammal, Balasaraswati's mother.

Balasaraswati's arengetram happened in 1925, and her first public performance in 1927. The Theosophical Society had long been present in the country. Their effort was to “redefine and glorify a ‘national’ Indian history and culture, and they eventually found a source for this rediscovered history in the notion of a classical age that was declared a pan Indian heritage” (Knight 63). Annie Besant and George Arundale, two theosophists, influenced two very significant people with regard to the anti-naught movement and the revival of art forms. These people were Muthulakshmi Reddi and Rukmini Devi, the earlier credited with singly spearheading a movement and eventually abolishing the devadasi system, and the latter for ‘reviving’ dance and providing it with respectability. I have discussed the role of Muthulakshmi Reddi in greater detail in the earlier section. While she advocated the abolition of the practice and the practitioners, she was opposed by E. Krishna Iyer, who advocated that the dance form itself should be preserved. The Madras Music Academy was set up precisely with this idea in mind, to bring back the art forms from oblivion. Though initially set up with the idea to salvage music, the Academy incorporated dance in 1931. After the first sponsored concert, the review mentioned that Bharatnatyam, which was being condemned for so long, was thought of as unworthy of all the criticism levelled against it. The performances of Balasaraswati

received mixed reviews around the 1930s. She was praised for her pure dance and criticised for her abhinaya. She is said to have worked really hard at this, by even performing just abhinaya concerts. At a later stage she commented that “dignified restraint is the hallmark of abhinaya... the dancer has no use for movements of the torso, but gestures only through the face and hands” (Knight 101). It should be noted here that eventually, it was abhinaya that was seen as her forte.

The arrival of Rukmini Devi posed some threat to the dancing community. Her project of re-visioning and reorganising dance came at a juncture where one of the concerns in society was to preserve the dance form. Her idea was also within the revisionary view of the Theosophical Society which was trying to create a classical past for the Nation. Rukmini Devi learnt from nattuvunar Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. She became the first woman to perform the traditional dance form from outside the community. Her performance gained social acceptability. And it was this that she banked on and reconstructed dance/Bharatnatyam as we know it now. She was always appreciative of Balasaraswati, and felt she had the right knowledge of both music and dance for she had a strong lineage behind her. The Anti-naught movement had left most of the nattuvunars impoverished. Many of them now started associating themselves with institutions which catered to teaching dance outside the community. A lot of them had already moved to Almora to assist the dancing group of Uday Shankar. Rukmini Devi, also, took stock of this situation and employed a great many of them at Kalakshetra. Thus, not only did she provide employment to these artists, she made the students learn from the traditional masters and also moved the dance form beyond the monopolised family structure, where it was now imparted to people outside the community. Thus, the earlier attempt to distance the art form from the practitioners was actually becoming a reality through these new institutions:

As a reconstructed style of Bharatnatyam emerged, one area of experimentation was the use of musical compositions that were not from the repertoire composed for dance....Most of the practitioners and teachers from the traditional professional community agreed that pieces not composed for dance could not be suitably substituted for those that were....The great nattuvunar Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, in a speech... remarked, “Departure from tradition, the inclusion of totally unsuitable pieces in the name of innovation only lowers the standard of this art. I am not against change. There is bound to be change and new ideas. But these can be called by a different name and not brought under the name of Bharatnatyam. Such innovations make a sublime art ridiculous... Bizarre costumes and inappropriate themes will only lead to the destruction of this art”. (Knight 118-119)

Thus, Rukmini Devi in her attempt to revive the dance form, at some point was deviating from its original structure.

The most talked about controversy between Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi was on the issue of *sringara*. Rukmini Devi emphasised non *sringara* songs, while Balasaraswati believed *sringara* as the essence of dance.

Sringara is an ancient concept that permeates the aesthetics of the Indian consciousness, and it is this generative theme and the rules that govern its treatment that may be described as classical....The poetry composed for Bharatnatyam was predominantly in Sringara Rasa... Balasaraswati was fully aware of a bawdy, irreverent quality to the repertoire of traditional Bharatnatyam... She avoided them in concerts. (Knight 102)

The arena where this controversy reached its climax was the All India Dance Festival in Bombay in 1945. The festival opened with Rukmini Devi's performance. Clearly she was the predominant star, as it also included performances choreographed by her and by other performers/artists who hailed from Kalakshetra. She included a *sringara* piece in her performance, only to prove the point that “if you are respectable, then *sringara* would itself become respectable, and that if you were not, then the performance of *sringara* was not” (Knight 131). Apart from this, a part of her profile read as follows, “She has succeeded in dramatizing it with appropriate music and costumes, and has rescued it from all monopolies, specially as regards to teaching and conducting” (Knight 130). This was in contrast to the non existence of a profile for Balasaraswati. These troubled the sensibilities of Balasaraswati.

Her performance was slotted just after a presentation by the students of Kalakshetra, who had used props and done up the stage. Balasaraswati performed on an empty stage in contrast to this, without any additional lighting or props, to her mother singing for her. She had proved a point through this that it was not just about props and stage effects and her performance was remarkable.

Balasaraswati, too, like Subbulakshmi, performed across the globe. She also taught extensively at Universities in the USA. At home, she was awarded with all the honours one could think of. But both of them represent two ends of a paradigm. While Balasaraswati chose to live in a manner consistent with the family culture and social order that preceded her, that of the devadasi system and believed in the lineage, like her grandmother, Subbulakshmi gained social acceptability, was accepted as the 'ideal' Hindu Brahmin wife, by virtue of her marriage to Sadasivam, and his project of presenting her as one.

Of the four texts that I analyse above, three (M.S., Balasaraswati and Bangalore Nagarathnamma) have been written by male biographers. Veena Dhanammal's biography is written by Lakshmi Subramanian. I observe that Subramanian has a far nuanced and critical approach towards the life and events in the life of Dhanammal: "It locates her (Dhanammal's) art within the cultural, social and intellectual milieu she inhabited, allowing readers to track the changing musical landscape of southern India, as a process of urbanisation — beginning in the late nineteenth century..." (Subramanian Front Cover). The two texts, the biographies of M.S. and of Bangalore Nagarathnamma do provide biographical details about the lives of the mentioned artists, but fail to look at them critically. Douglas M. Knight's biography of Balasaraswati is different from these two in terms of the fact that he is related to Balasaraswati and hence, a lot of information which is otherwise unavailable elsewhere can be accessed in this text. Some of them are incidents and stories which have been passed on from one generation to another. In that sense, this book acts as a parallel text to that of Lakshmi Subramanian, where certain events overlap. While Subramanian's text closely interlinks the art forms and the politics of performance and analyses one's effects on the other, the other texts merely provide biographical details of the artists.

Through the four lives analysed above, I trace the effects of the anti-naught movement, the revival of dance and the abolition of the devadasi system on the life of the practitioners from the community. Veena Dhanammal, being more of a private salon performer, was not affected by the ongoing debates around the anti-naught movement. Though she voiced her views against it, she did have a select set of connoisseurs who would come listen to her at her home. Bangalore Nagarathnamma fought fiercely against the reform movements, whether it was bringing back *Radhika Santwanam*, or the memorandum advocating why the devadasi system should not be abolished. She was very vocal about her position. Neither Dhanammal nor Nagarathnamma felt the necessity of a male member in the house. M. S. Subbulakshmi, for me, represents the other end of the paradigm as I have mentioned above, for whom the security of a family, a husband, and social acceptability could do wonders. She therefore fitted into the paradigm of the naught abolitionists who advocated marriages of devadasis, even if they were second wives to the youth. She became the chosen 'ideal' for an entire community's aspiration— that of social acceptance. Balasaraswati, till her last day, fought against the restructuring of dance. She was against the stage set up, the changes in music and lights, the costume, etc. She believed that the art form should not have been distorted in the name of reviving. She never gave up on her style, never incorporated the costume changes, etc. But the fact that she had very few students made her form of dance fade away. Also, the fact that she was, at the end of the day, a devadasi as opposed to the new emerging upper caste women who were learning and teaching Bharatanatyam, made their brand of dance more acceptable. The revivalists reconstructed and restructured dance, giving it a new look and perhaps life. And eventually it was this brand of dance, taught by the traditional people (belonging to the community) but under the control of people from outside the community that was more acceptable and more dominant in the mid twentieth century and thereafter.

Notes

- ¹ The memorandum mentioned points to issues like, devadasis are not prostitutes, real purpose of the devadasi caste is religion and service, that their fundamental principle is 'Service to God', the whole community cannot be condemned for the sins of a few, that their right to property would be affected, that they have enough support for their cause in the public opinion, that what they need at this juncture is education, etc. ('Madras Devadasi Association' in *Bharatnatyam, A Reader* edited by Daves Soneji 128)

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Life Narratives of Persons with Disability in India: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: Historically in India as elsewhere in the world, there has been a deep-rooted cultural antipathy to persons with disabilities, wherein they have been portrayed as medical anomalies, helpless victims and a lifelong burden for family and society. In recent years, research surrounding the intersection of disability, sexuality and gender and its importance in the lives of those who are in the centre of it has been gaining recognition. Representation of persons with disability in disability scholarships would provide an opportunity to view the world through their lens. Life narratives in this case, have the potential of bringing forth the 'personal', which helps in understanding a community objectively and empathetically, which is essential for synchronous functioning in a diverse society.

The primary material for this paper includes the narratives and first-hand accounts of persons with disability in India in an edited book titled *Skin Stories* (2019) wherein the disabled individual is the subject of enquiry. These narratives shed light on a different discourse of sexuality for the disabled individual. We find an active desiring sexual subject in these narratives, in contrast to the passive and objectified view of disabled lives. The methodology for this study-discourse analysis through a critical theoretical framework – would enable an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural, historical, and political context of these narratives. Through my study, I have tried to explore the intersection of disability, gender and sexuality in the lives of persons with disability in India. and shed light on the diminished social, economic, political, cultural and interpersonal rights of the people from the disabled community, and enable one to think critically not only about disability but also other historical marginalized groups.

Keywords: Disability, gender, sexuality, life writing, discourse analysis

Introduction

“To define ourselves, name ourselves,
speak for ourselves instead of being defined and spoken for by others.” (Lorde 43)

Dis-ability, as the word suggests, has always had an existence contrary to 'ability' (Ghai). One would assume that this makes the understanding of disability unidirectional and linear. However, over the years disability studies theorists, academicians, activists, policy makers, doctors and persons with disability have actively tried to contest this understanding of disability (Goodley). With years of research in the domain of disability studies, scholars have suggested that disability, in fact, can be understood in more than one way. In the simplest form, it could either refer to one's inability to perform a task, or even the act of stopping one from performing a task. These polysemic and paradoxical understandings of disability lay the fertile ground for the inception of, and association with the stereotypes, prejudices, negative attitudes and beliefs surrounding disability as well as the persons with disability.

Negative attitudes towards people with disability exist in any society (Ghai). Such attitudes often affect their quality of life and at times even their basic human rights, particularly in developing countries like India (Ghai). In a study conducted by Prof. Ajit Dalal to understand the discrimina-

tory attitudes towards people with physical disabilities, it was discovered that people with physical disabilities often tend to suffer more due to the societal attitudes and prejudices, than due to their bodily impairments. To this effect, one could also state that the disability policies, programmes and practices in any country reveals the attitudes of the larger able bodied society (Ghai). Such negative, paternalistic attitudes and prejudices create barriers in lives of these people with disabilities which often prevent them from living a full life. Thus, there is an imperative need to find a solution to this problem of 'disability' experienced by persons with bodily impairment in any society.

The solution to the problem of disability lies partly in how the problem is understood, and where it is located (Ghai). A person with disability in India is defined as, "someone with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders their full and effective participation in a society equally with others" (Rights of Persons with Disability). This definition sheds light on the general understanding of disability, where any kind of disability is considered to be caused by an 'impairment', which renders the person with disability, a status of being defective or lacking something (Galvin). The problem with this definition much like most of the definitions that have been before it is that, firstly, the onus of the disability is primarily on the individual with 'impairment', rather than social factors around them like negative attitudes, stereotypes, inaccessible infrastructure, inaccessible transportation system, communication system, lack of quality education and employment opportunities etc (Ghai); secondly, disability here, is being viewed as something inferior and less desirable, which negates any possibility of establishing equal participation in any society for persons with disability. Finally, persons with disabilities here are seen as the 'other' in contrast to the larger able bodied society, which dictates the rules of performance for participation, based on a hegemonic, understanding of the binary codes of abled and disabled. This lays the ground for examining the political debates concerning disability, the models of understanding disability and exploring the possibility of understanding disability in relation to other intersections like gender and sexuality, wherein the questions surrounding representation could be addressed by studying the lived experiences of people with disabilities.

Disabled people have been spoken about, and spoken for, but rarely listened to. (Sherry 165) Beth E. Ferri in her paper titled 'Disability Life Writing and the Politics of Knowing', talks about contemporary disability life writings, which have the potential of critiquing oppressive ideologies and shaking the foundation of the normative or the 'fixed center' (Ferri). The dominant discourses then, are contested by such life writings with its relevant, politically grounded counternarratives.

"No body, no voice; no voice, no body. That's what I know in my bones" (Mairs 96). An interdisciplinary approach of understanding disability through the medium of popular culture, first person narratives, films and other forms of art, gives one the vantage point to delve more meaningfully into the domain or field of enquiry. These works deliver counternarratives which provides the opportunity to "imagine disability otherwise... and move beyond overly deterministic normalizing discourses of cure and care" (Ware 146).

Life writings are able to create 'counter discourse' which challenges the dominant understanding of disability as lacking (Mintz). The subjectivity of the individual and their contextual identity as a result of their complex socio-political position legitimizes their narratives of their life experiences (17). By constructing the society's understanding of raw, individual life experiences, and giving it a coherent meaning through stories, life writings do cultural work (Garland-Thomson 121). This can be seen for instance in the book 'Storyteller', where the author Silko connects her personal narratives with stories of Laguna Pueblo, so that she can situate herself as a voice bridging multiple cultures (Smith and Watson 17). Such narratives offer an important forms of social critique.

Popular Culture and Construction of Disability

Construction of disability and the life experiences of persons with disability in cinema and television for instance, has also been largely based on the dominant understanding of disability as a curse,

inflicted on the disabled due to their past *karma* or as an object of pity and charity (Ghai). The other extreme of their representation has been observed in cinemas where either popular able-bodied actors play the roles of PwD, or storylines are built where the person with disability is expected to see beyond their disability and accomplish extra ordinary achievements in life, celebrated for ‘rising up, despite their disability’. Such ways of narrativizing disability in order to make it ‘pleasant’ for a largely ableist society portrays the disabled as the inspirational “super-crips” (Mintz, 17). Life writings offer insightful glance into the lived realities of persons with disability and bring forth a rather unadulterated picture, talking of the facets of their life without the much unwanted use of euphemisms or catering to ableist assumptions.

Butler contends that perhaps what one fails to notice here is that ‘we are never outside language.’ One could express themselves, only through the language that is available to them (p. xxiv). In the case of disability, normative frameworks determine who is allowed to claim subjectivity and who is not. Thus, in the process of narrating one’s story, the individual arrives at a position where they must use the existing, normative language to build upon their story. The writer finds themselves to be inevitably caught within the webs of meaning informed by normative assumptions. This is particularly problematic for the domain of disability since most of the normative assumptions revolve around the concepts of ‘seeking cure’. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson writes about how most of these stories are those of despair, catastrophe, loss, excess, suffering, and relentless cure-seeking” (114). Nevertheless, one must engage in this dominant discourse to be able to put forward life writings. In doing so, one brings forward the dominant hegemonic scripts, simply by engaging with them. Perhaps reiterating how one needs to be ‘in the system to change the system’.

People from within the community have nevertheless engaged in the task of changing the society simply by reclaiming voices which have been colonized by a largely able-bodied society. Disability life writers like Mairs and others continue to write “bare brace and . . . tongue hanging out” (105), as an effort to continue their goal towards disability politic grounded in lived experiences and necessarily embodied.

Disability through a Critical Lens

As an analysis method, critical discourse analysis is most clearly defined for understanding how alternate words can be used to create an impression of the same thing and examining how the words used are also capable of creating new ideas and impressions. Both these roles of discourse analysis have been central to the discipline of Disability studies, which is aimed at exploring how ‘disability’ is created in the society through the use of language. The development of discourse perspective in disability studies can be traced back to the late 1990s and early 2000s in both the United Kingdom and America (Snyder & Mitchell), where the construction of disability by linguistics, culture and society was scrutinized and the concept of intersectionality explored. Discourse analysis was used to study other domains and disciplines which were thematically more or less similar to disability in questioning the unequal power relations, marginalization and discrimination, be it through media representation and power (Fairclough), gender (Wodak), identity (ibid.) or racism (Wodak & Van Dijk). Moreover the concepts of gender and sexuality, which are key in this research study have been exclusively focused in discourse analysis, along with disability (Grue). For the purpose of studying life writings of persons with disability, narratives from the book, ‘Skin Stories’ are analyzed through a critical discourse analysis.

The first narrative here, a writing titled “*As a woman with a disability, I’m either seen as ‘helpless’ or ‘heroic’*” authored by Preeti Singh, gives words to the emotions and thoughts of an eight-year-old girl with disabilities, who was subjected to the absurdities of normalcy at a very early stage in life. The author, now in her mid-thirties, addresses the power hegemonies which were stated clearly to her, of one that exists between a person with disability and a non-disabled individual. The author articulates her predicament as a student, having to repeatedly prove herself, and her worth through

repetitive examinations, while her peers were not required to do it. She rather shares her amazement at her school showering her with awards for being 'brave' and getting educated, 'despite' having a disability and further awarding her friends, for 'extending a hand of friendship' towards someone with disability, shedding light on the vast distance between expectations and realities for children with disabilities. Her reaction of amazement here, can be seen as a transgression, where she mocks the dominant discourses of disability, tending to a charity model and perhaps creates avenues for subversion. The lens of bravery prevents people from really seeing her, the person who might be dealing with her mental health concerns, experiencing heartbreak or simply having a bad day. By focussing on the concept of bravery, she contests the identity politics of persons with disability, for whom 'disability' becomes hypervisible and all other markers of their identity dissolves in the background. The author shares the agony that she experienced at 9 years of age, where during her grandmother's funeral she was told by distant relatives, how she has been a burden for her family. She narrates her lived realities, as she recollects the instances where her dear ones claimed, 'she should have died, and that it was stupid of her parents to spend so much money on her health and education!'. In this context, it is important to gain a clearer view of their socio-political realities, and histories, within which women with disabilities are located. There is a preference for the male child in the Indian subcontinent. So, a woman with a disability suffers multiple layers of marginalization.

The identity of a woman with disability becomes a marker of a wound, a spoiled identity, the preference for the male child in the light of both, the ritualistic relevance of the son in a Hindu family and the social and economic burden associated with the daughters of the family (Johri, 1999). Johri further elaborates on this social construction of the daughters, where they are seen as a *parai dhan*, or another's property. The daughter here, is raised by her family and eventually given away to her husband in the ceremony of marriage, popularly known as *kanyadaan*, or the gift of a virgin daughter. It is a rather implicit understanding that this gift is perfect in all senses of the word, and in an ableist world, the impaired body becomes a symbol of imperfection (Ghai, 2015). Having a daughter with a disability creates a rather difficult terrain for the father, who would feel compelled to compensate for his daughter's disability. This could be either in the form of large amounts of money and property as dowry, or could translate to a compromise wherein she is married to a significantly older man with children or married to someone who is also disabled. Thus, being a daughter with a disability is often a matter of double burden. Dominant representations of women with disability have highlighted this double burden and constructed her figure as a victim, but on delving into their stories and life histories, we discover the latent transgressive subjectivities expressed by these women. This opens up new avenues for contestation.

The author continues to narrate her childhood experiences, where she can be seen often suppressing these emotions, till it was experienced in the form of a depressive episode. She contends that, like the rest of society, people with disabilities are simply carrying on with their lives. Whether they are being pushed away because they are pitied, or pushed forward because they are used as objects of 'inspiration', both ways, they are denied basic humanity. The fight for basic rights in the everyday for persons with disabilities may not be overt or polemical, rather individual and subtle. Such forms of everyday resistances are channels of critiquing the dominant ableist views surrounding disability. She closes her excerpt requesting the reader and the larger able bodied society as well, to let Persons with disabilities be who they are: complex, capable of many things, both good and bad. Through her narrative, she sheds light on how there is a need to realise that the most extraordinary thing about a person with disability is that they are ordinary. Here, the first-person voice of a woman with disabilities brings forth the emotions, thoughts and experiences of a larger subaltern group of persons with disability. It is rather ironic that the dominant stories of disabled individuals have been written by able bodied professionals or academicians, thus largely negating the power and agency obtained by the community to tell their stories in their words. Such narratives subvert the conventional representation of women with disabilities as passive victims or tragic objects of pity or models of heroism.

The next story “Heart Emojis and High Fives: Finding community in a virtual group of fellow women amputees” is the writings of young Antara Telang who gives an autobiographical account of her journey from being temporarily able bodied to disabled (Telang). The author places her story in the chronological order of events from the day she lost her leg and acquired her disability. She recalls the ‘dark and stormy’ evening when it all happened, where the ‘trees shook violently in the wind’, but she chose to listen to music on her headphones, disconnected perhaps, from the reality of a temporarily able-bodied existence. She narrates the accident, in which a tree completely ‘crushed’ her leg, and perhaps her life too. The second half of the narrative consists of her accounts of understanding her own bodily experiences, starting from being in a locked-up situation, healing mentally and physically from the trauma of the accident, in her bed for weeks on an end to learning to use wheelchairs and crutches. She recounts her efforts of fiercely fighting against the category of ‘disabled’ that she was put under, mostly by others, till she was completely exhausted. Writing about her ‘hatred’ for being put under this category, she brings forward her anger of being representative of a community, that had ‘nothing to do with her life, till then’ (Telang). She conveys her frustration as her ‘disability’ became her primary identity, and nothing else mattered. Such has been the reported experience of many more persons with disabilities, where their primary identity became their disability itself, conflicting with the person-first language used for addressing them. This phenomenon can be seen operating dominantly in any kind of marginalized communities based on race, gender, caste and class, where their oppressed identity takes the first position, followed by all their other identities. Left with limited options, she takes the path of ‘passing by’ as ‘normal’, by actively putting in effort to hide her disability, by wearing long pants, closed shoes and a prosthetic leg (Telang). The author describes her difficulty in accepting this new body and reality, which comes forward in her choice of words like ‘I limped back to my old life’ (ibid). As she learns to walk again, she recalls the questions and the stares which made her bury herself in her books and work, which turned out to be her new rescue. Books and travel gave her a sense of power and confidence, a feeling that she could be as capable as any other able-bodied person. In the third part of the narrative, she writes about her experience of being part of a disabled women’s support group, which went by the name ‘Wonder Women’. The group was able to do all that for her which modern medicines failed to do, by creating a support system of people who had similar experiences and more importantly understood what she was going through. It is perhaps interesting to note her emotions regarding being a member of this group evolve at different points in time, from a feeling of anger and frustration for being put in this group, to a sense of indifference and eventually to a state of joyful participation in the conversations that took place.

It is rather thought-provoking to see how the body is conceptualized or represented and how the text takes up questions of ‘embodiment’ in this writing. The author’s perception or understanding of her own body transpires from being merely a part of herself which she rarely had to think about till her accident, nevertheless completed her, to the experience of the loss of her leg, which puts her in a state of turmoil and pain, literally and metaphorically. Her states of grief are narrated across her writing, starting firstly from her phase of denial, where she ends up being in her room for days together to her second phase of anger at herself and others. Though various models of disability that have been posed over time have suggested multiple ways of approaching the subject matter of disability, first person narratives have been addressed only by the empowerment model, which still struggles to find its place in the Indian understanding.

One can see how through the text, the ‘disabled body’ becomes an alternate source of knowledge for the author. It is rather pertinent to understand the concept of embodied knowledge here, which is the simplest way of acknowledging the body as the knowing subject. This kind of knowledge is similar to the cognitive science understanding of procedural knowledge, addressing knowledge which can be better performed, than verbally explained (Stilling et. Al), On the contrary, the Cartesian idea of mind-body dualism is still dominant in mainstream cognitive sciences. The methodological scepticism of the Cartesian model of understanding the mind and body relationship views the knowing

subject to be the mind, while the body is just a mere known object; negating the possibility of 'embodied knowledge' (Descartes). It can be argued that embodied knowledge rejects the claim of the Cartesian dualism and contends that the mind, which lacks a clear representation, is experienced throughout the body and the variety of experiences that one witnesses within the lifeworld, a state Husserl defined as *Lebenswelt*. Through the analysis of the narrative here, one could see the complex interplay of the author's mental state and physical state. The change in one significantly affecting the other.

Intersection of Disability and Gender

While addressing the question of intersectionality, the intersection of disability and gender plays one of the most critical roles for any individual with disability. Starting from the right to live, to the access to healthcare, education, employment opportunities, right to have a romantic relationship, be married or even have a child depends to a great extent on one's gender (Ghai). It is understood that the prevalent traditional gender roles and its expectations make life for women with disability in India more difficult than for their counterpart (Mehrotra). Evidence shows that among older women, their disabilities are often discounted if their spouses are alive. The cultural differences within the country shows that the older women in north India are often enough much more disadvantaged when compared with the same population in the south of the country (Sengupta and Agree). This kind of ignorance or avoidance of the 'disabled woman' can also be seen in the disability movements as well as the women's movements. For the author, her introduction to this intersection became visible after her amputation, when she was added to a women's support group named, 'Wonder Women'. This group of women with disabilities shared almost every aspect of their experience including travel pictures, anecdotes of funny or angering incidents, stories of pain and comfort to even pregnancy concerns like, 'Carrying a pregnancy to term despite other people being mistrustful of their ability to do so'. These women created a space for celebrating their success stories and those of their failures, it gave them a space to be who they are. The author raises critical questions concerning the experiences of women with disabilities, which in its unique sense, is one of restraining women and questioning their capabilities. Be it one's child bearing ability or caregiving skills, domains which are considered to be the quintessential features of any woman are continuously questioned and criticized in the case of women with disabilities. This could be understood in terms of the blatant dehumanization and seizing these women off their femininity, the qualities which makes a woman identify with her gender. The Wonder Women would spend hours together simply to listen to each other, help each other out even though most of these women of the group had never met each other. The author talks about the possibilities that she was able to see as a part of this group and how it helped her embrace her disabled identity (Telang).

The intersection of disability and sexuality in the text has been well addressed by the author, leaving no gaps for incorrect assumptions or second guesses to seep in. In fact, she recalls the first few things that she heard from her relatives after her amputation was not about her health or wellbeing, rather it was concerning the most important facet of marriage. They were whispering, 'Poor thing. Who will marry her now? How long will her family take care of her, after all?'

It was not much later when a young boy she likes suggests her how she would be 'better off moving to places like the UK or France', so that she would be around people who could be more open minded about her 'condition'. The author recalls how the thought of her being undatable in that sense was a much more scarier thought, than her being handicapped. Her fear of getting rejecting and never finding a suitable match led her to completely close herself from all potential romantic endeavors. It was only under the influence of alcohol and some good friends that she finally decided to explore her options, through a dating app. Her experience of dating in a virtual world gave her the opportunity to explore her sexuality, without the fear of her disability being her primary identity. Having met people for dates, she was able to enjoy the company of those who went out with her and her experiences were much similar to those that non disabled woman have. Them accepting her the way she was, gave her the opportunity to accept herself.

Much contrary to the popular perception of disabled individuals as 'asexual' beings, the author's own experiences point towards a series of rather optimistic scenarios where she realized that most people she dated were not bothered by her disability, making her feel much acknowledged and appreciated with statements like, 'It's just one foot right? All the rest is there na?'. She recounts how most of the men she went out with are still good friends with her, after which she entered into a relationship with someone, she met offline.

Ghai, while talking about the relevance of 'language' in the context of disability, quotes Stiker when she says that there is 'no speech outside the systems of languages'. She further states that disability ceases to exist outside the periphery of social and cultural constructions. This would further implicate that attitude towards persons with disability originate from the vast social and cultural references and constructions. Disability as a concept is rooted in the religious texts, folklore, cinema, mythologies, poems, proverbs and riddles (Ghai). In a study conducted by Mapley to examine the representation of disability in the children's book 'Read with Biff, Chipp and Kipper', critical discourse analysis was employed. The study revealed that in the text, 'normalcy' was given high regard and idolised, which resulted in the representation influencing the self identity and social attitudes toward disability. The study particularly highlights the construct of 'aesthetic nervousness' which could be resulting from a normative culture which reprimands anything that deviates from what is considered to be normal. Such hegemonic practices produce a repetitive process that plays a significant role in the production of future texts, social justice and creation of an inclusive society (Mapley). Such cultural expectation is mostly reflected in the beliefs, values held, rituals and customs, thus being partial expressions of a world in which 'dualities of domination/ subordination, superiority/inferiority and normality/abnormality are relentlessly reinforced and legitimized' (Charlton). These learned systems of meaning and behaviour are usually passed from one generation to the next (Carter and Qureshi). Nevertheless, it is important to note here that cultures evolve with their interaction with history, politics and power and thus no culture remains the same over time (Venkatesh). Though disability, much like caste, gender, class, ethnicity is deeply embedded in one's culture, its meaning across the world has been given a 'transcendent status' (Harry). Questions surrounding who is disabled, the kind of treatment they need, their rights and responsibilities have been an intrinsic part of the global discourse on disability (Priestly) (Hutchison).

The author's use of humor in her writings has been another interesting aspect which captures the reader's attention. This can be seen as her defence mechanism to cope with the anxiety provoking events or to fill in the void that she experiences between her lived realities and what others assumed of her. Thirdly, it could also be read as an attempt to bring in her personhood into her writings. The underlying expectation of every disabled story to be a story of hopelessness, sorrow, grief has been contested by the author through her work. This can be seen clearly in her mention of a dramatic music as she unfolds the story of her amputation, her use of sarcasm when she says, 'I was absolutely so very fine' while narrating her efforts of hiding her disability under her long pants to the rest of the world.

While talking about his views on capitalism, Karl Marx contends that any kind of charity is the 'perfume of the sewers of capitalism'. This view stands true for people with disability also, wherein they are often subjected to the bitter/sweet realities of charity in their everyday life (Goodley). Simi Linton, while describing the disability scholarship, states that, 'the overwhelming majority of scholarship on disability either utilises or implies the third person plural: 'they' do this, 'they' are like that, 'they' need such and such (Linton). This contributes to the objectification of disabled people and their experience of being denied of individuality and selfhood, imposing a collective, generalised identity. Various models of disability that have been posed over time has suggested multiple ways of approaching the subject matter of disability.

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Introduction

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Negative attitudes towards people with disability exist in any society (Ghai). Such attitudes often affect their quality of life and at times even their basic human rights, particularly in developing countries like India (Ghai). In a study conducted by Prof. Ajit Dalal to understand the discrimina-

tory attitudes towards people with physical disabilities, it was discovered that people with physical disabilities often tend to suffer more due to the societal attitudes and prejudices, than due to their bodily impairments. To this effect, one could also state that the disability policies, programmes and practices in any country reveals the attitudes of the larger able bodied society (Ghai). Such negative, paternalistic attitudes and prejudices create barriers in lives of these people with disabilities which often prevent them from living a full life. Thus, there is an imperative need to find a solution to this problem of 'disability' experienced by persons with bodily impairment in any society.

The solution to the problem of disability lies partly in how the problem is understood, and where it is located (Ghai). A person with disability in India is defined as, "someone with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders their full and effective participation in a society equally with others" (Rights of Persons with Disability). This definition sheds light on the general understanding of disability, where any kind of disability is considered to be caused by an 'impairment', which renders the person with disability, a status of being defective or lacking something (Galvin). The problem with this definition much like most of the definitions that have been before it is that, firstly, the onus of the disability is primarily on the individual with 'impairment', rather than social factors around them like negative attitudes, stereotypes, inaccessible infrastructure, inaccessible transportation system, communication system, lack of quality education and employment opportunities etc (Ghai); secondly, disability here, is being viewed as something inferior and less desirable, which negates any possibility of establishing equal participation in any society for persons with disability. Finally, persons with disabilities here are seen as the 'other' in contrast to the larger able bodied society, which dictates the rules of performance for participation, based on a hegemonic, understanding of the binary codes of abled and disabled. This lays the ground for examining the political debates concerning disability, the models of understanding disability and exploring the possibility of understanding disability in relation to other intersections like gender and sexuality, wherein the questions surrounding representation could be addressed by studying the lived experiences of people with disabilities.

Disabled people have been spoken about, and spoken for, but rarely listened to. (Sherry 165) Beth E. Ferri in her paper titled 'Disability Life Writing and the Politics of Knowing', talks about contemporary disability life writings, which have the potential of critiquing oppressive ideologies and shaking the foundation of the normative or the 'fixed center' (Ferri). The dominant discourses then, are contested by such life writings with its relevant, politically grounded counternarratives.

"No body, no voice; no voice, no body. That's what I know in my bones" (Mairs 96). An interdisciplinary approach of understanding disability through the medium of popular culture, first person narratives, films and other forms of art, gives one the vantage point to delve more meaningfully into the domain or field of enquiry. These works deliver counternarratives which provides the opportunity to "imagine disability otherwise... and move beyond overly deterministic normalizing discourses of cure and care" (Ware 146).

Life writings are able to create 'counter discourse' which challenges the dominant understanding of disability as lacking (Mintz). The subjectivity of the individual and their contextual identity as a result of their complex socio-political position legitimizes their narratives of their life experiences (17). By constructing the society's understanding of raw, individual life experiences, and giving it a coherent meaning through stories, life writings do cultural work (Garland-Thomson 121). This can be seen for instance in the book 'Storyteller', where the author Silko connects her personal narratives with stories of Laguna Pueblo, so that she can situate herself as a voice bridging multiple cultures (Smith and Watson 17). Such narratives offer an important forms of social critique.

Popular Culture and Construction of Disability

Construction of disability and the life experiences of persons with disability in cinema and television for instance, has also been largely based on the dominant understanding of disability as a curse,

inflicted on the disabled due to their past *karma* or as an object of pity and charity (Ghai). The other extreme of their representation has been observed in cinemas where either popular able-bodied actors play the roles of PwD, or storylines are built where the person with disability is expected to see beyond their disability and accomplish extra ordinary achievements in life, celebrated for ‘rising up, despite their disability’. Such ways of narrativizing disability in order to make it ‘pleasant’ for a largely ableist society portrays the disabled as the inspirational “super-crips” (Mintz, 17). Life writings offer insightful glance into the lived realities of persons with disability and bring forth a rather unadulterated picture, talking of the facets of their life without the much unwanted use of euphemisms or catering to ableist assumptions.

Butler contends that perhaps what one fails to notice here is that ‘we are never outside language.’ One could express themselves, only through the language that is available to them (p. xxiv). In the case of disability, normative frameworks determine who is allowed to claim subjectivity and who is not. Thus, in the process of narrating one’s story, the individual arrives at a position where they must use the existing, normative language to build upon their story. The writer finds themselves to be inevitably caught within the webs of meaning informed by normative assumptions. This is particularly problematic for the domain of disability since most of the normative assumptions revolve around the concepts of ‘seeking cure’. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson writes about how most of these stories are those of despair, catastrophe, loss, excess, suffering, and relentless cure-seeking” (114). Nevertheless, one must engage in this dominant discourse to be able to put forward life writings. In doing so, one brings forward the dominant hegemonic scripts, simply by engaging with them. Perhaps reiterating how one needs to be ‘in the system to change the system’.

People from within the community have nevertheless engaged in the task of changing the society simply by reclaiming voices which have been colonized by a largely able-bodied society. Disability life writers like Mairs and others continue to write “bare brace and . . . tongue hanging out” (105), as an effort to continue their goal towards disability politic grounded in lived experiences and necessarily embodied.

Disability through a Critical Lens

As an analysis method, critical discourse analysis is most clearly defined for understanding how alternate words can be used to create an impression of the same thing and examining how the words used are also capable of creating new ideas and impressions. Both these roles of discourse analysis have been central to the discipline of Disability studies, which is aimed at exploring how ‘disability’ is created in the society through the use of language. The development of discourse perspective in disability studies can be traced back to the late 1990s and early 2000s in both the United Kingdom and America (Snyder & Mitchell), where the construction of disability by linguistics, culture and society was scrutinized and the concept of intersectionality explored. Discourse analysis was used to study other domains and disciplines which were thematically more or less similar to disability in questioning the unequal power relations, marginalization and discrimination, be it through media representation and power (Fairclough), gender (Wodak), identity (ibid.) or racism (Wodak & Van Dijk). Moreover the concepts of gender and sexuality, which are key in this research study have been exclusively focused in discourse analysis, along with disability (Grue). For the purpose of studying life writings of persons with disability, narratives from the book, ‘Skin Stories’ are analyzed through a critical discourse analysis.

The first narrative here, a writing titled “*As a woman with a disability, I’m either seen as ‘helpless’ or ‘heroic’*” authored by Preeti Singh, gives words to the emotions and thoughts of an eight-year-old girl with disabilities, who was subjected to the absurdities of normalcy at a very early stage in life. The author, now in her mid-thirties, addresses the power hegemonies which were stated clearly to her, of one that exists between a person with disability and a non-disabled individual. The author articulates her predicament as a student, having to repeatedly prove herself, and her worth through

repetitive examinations, while her peers were not required to do it. She rather shares her amazement at her school showering her with awards for being 'brave' and getting educated, 'despite' having a disability and further awarding her friends, for 'extending a hand of friendship' towards someone with disability, shedding light on the vast distance between expectations and realities for children with disabilities. Her reaction of amazement here, can be seen as a transgression, where she mocks the dominant discourses of disability, tending to a charity model and perhaps creates avenues for subversion. The lens of bravery prevents people from really seeing her, the person who might be dealing with her mental health concerns, experiencing heartbreak or simply having a bad day. By focussing on the concept of bravery, she contests the identity politics of persons with disability, for whom 'disability' becomes hypervisible and all other markers of their identity dissolves in the background. The author shares the agony that she experienced at 9 years of age, where during her grandmother's funeral she was told by distant relatives, how she has been a burden for her family. She narrates her lived realities, as she recollects the instances where her dear ones claimed, 'she should have died, and that it was stupid of her parents to spend so much money on her health and education!'. In this context, it is important to gain a clearer view of their socio-political realities, and histories, within which women with disabilities are located. There is a preference for the male child in the Indian subcontinent. So, a woman with a disability suffers multiple layers of marginalization.

The identity of a woman with disability becomes a marker of a wound, a spoiled identity, the preference for the male child in the light of both, the ritualistic relevance of the son in a Hindu family and the social and economic burden associated with the daughters of the family (Johri, 1999). Johri further elaborates on this social construction of the daughters, where they are seen as a *parai dhan*, or another's property. The daughter here, is raised by her family and eventually given away to her husband in the ceremony of marriage, popularly known as *kanyadaan*, or the gift of a virgin daughter. It is a rather implicit understanding that this gift is perfect in all senses of the word, and in an ableist world, the impaired body becomes a symbol of imperfection (Ghai, 2015). Having a daughter with a disability creates a rather difficult terrain for the father, who would feel compelled to compensate for his daughter's disability. This could be either in the form of large amounts of money and property as dowry, or could translate to a compromise wherein she is married to a significantly older man with children or married to someone who is also disabled. Thus, being a daughter with a disability is often a matter of double burden. Dominant representations of women with disability have highlighted this double burden and constructed her figure as a victim, but on delving into their stories and life histories, we discover the latent transgressive subjectivities expressed by these women. This opens up new avenues for contestation.

The author continues to narrate her childhood experiences, where she can be seen often suppressing these emotions, till it was experienced in the form of a depressive episode. She contends that, like the rest of society, people with disabilities are simply carrying on with their lives. Whether they are being pushed away because they are pitied, or pushed forward because they are used as objects of 'inspiration', both ways, they are denied basic humanity. The fight for basic rights in the everyday for persons with disabilities may not be overt or polemical, rather individual and subtle. Such forms of everyday resistances are channels of critiquing the dominant ableist views surrounding disability. She closes her excerpt requesting the reader and the larger able bodied society as well, to let Persons with disabilities be who they are: complex, capable of many things, both good and bad. Through her narrative, she sheds light on how there is a need to realise that the most extraordinary thing about a person with disability is that they are ordinary. Here, the first-person voice of a woman with disabilities brings forth the emotions, thoughts and experiences of a larger subaltern group of persons with disability. It is rather ironic that the dominant stories of disabled individuals have been written by able bodied professionals or academicians, thus largely negating the power and agency obtained by the community to tell their stories in their words. Such narratives subvert the conventional representation of women with disabilities as passive victims or tragic objects of pity or models of heroism.

The next story “Heart Emojis and High Fives: Finding community in a virtual group of fellow women amputees” is the writings of young Antara Telang who gives an autobiographical account of her journey from being temporarily able bodied to disabled (Telang). The author places her story in the chronological order of events from the day she lost her leg and acquired her disability. She recalls the ‘dark and stormy’ evening when it all happened, where the ‘trees shook violently in the wind’, but she chose to listen to music on her headphones, disconnected perhaps, from the reality of a temporarily able-bodied existence. She narrates the accident, in which a tree completely ‘crushed’ her leg, and perhaps her life too. The second half of the narrative consists of her accounts of understanding her own bodily experiences, starting from being in a locked-up situation, healing mentally and physically from the trauma of the accident, in her bed for weeks on an end to learning to use wheelchairs and crutches. She recounts her efforts of fiercely fighting against the category of ‘disabled’ that she was put under, mostly by others, till she was completely exhausted. Writing about her ‘hatred’ for being put under this category, she brings forward her anger of being representative of a community, that had ‘nothing to do with her life, till then’ (Telang). She conveys her frustration as her ‘disability’ became her primary identity, and nothing else mattered. Such has been the reported experience of many more persons with disabilities, where their primary identity became their disability itself, conflicting with the person-first language used for addressing them. This phenomenon can be seen operating dominantly in any kind of marginalized communities based on race, gender, caste and class, where their oppressed identity takes the first position, followed by all their other identities. Left with limited options, she takes the path of ‘passing by’ as ‘normal’, by actively putting in effort to hide her disability, by wearing long pants, closed shoes and a prosthetic leg (Telang). The author describes her difficulty in accepting this new body and reality, which comes forward in her choice of words like ‘I limped back to my old life’ (ibid). As she learns to walk again, she recalls the questions and the stares which made her bury herself in her books and work, which turned out to be her new rescue. Books and travel gave her a sense of power and confidence, a feeling that she could be as capable as any other able-bodied person. In the third part of the narrative, she writes about her experience of being part of a disabled women’s support group, which went by the name ‘Wonder Women’. The group was able to do all that for her which modern medicines failed to do, by creating a support system of people who had similar experiences and more importantly understood what she was going through. It is perhaps interesting to note her emotions regarding being a member of this group evolve at different points in time, from a feeling of anger and frustration for being put in this group, to a sense of indifference and eventually to a state of joyful participation in the conversations that took place.

It is rather thought-provoking to see how the body is conceptualized or represented and how the text takes up questions of ‘embodiment’ in this writing. The author’s perception or understanding of her own body transpires from being merely a part of herself which she rarely had to think about till her accident, nevertheless completed her, to the experience of the loss of her leg, which puts her in a state of turmoil and pain, literally and metaphorically. Her states of grief are narrated across her writing, starting firstly from her phase of denial, where she ends up being in her room for days together to her second phase of anger at herself and others. Though various models of disability that have been posed over time have suggested multiple ways of approaching the subject matter of disability, first person narratives have been addressed only by the empowerment model, which still struggles to find its place in the Indian understanding.

One can see how through the text, the ‘disabled body’ becomes an alternate source of knowledge for the author. It is rather pertinent to understand the concept of embodied knowledge here, which is the simplest way of acknowledging the body as the knowing subject. This kind of knowledge is similar to the cognitive science understanding of procedural knowledge, addressing knowledge which can be better performed, than verbally explained (Stilling et. Al), On the contrary, the Cartesian idea of mind-body dualism is still dominant in mainstream cognitive sciences. The methodological scepticism of the Cartesian model of understanding the mind and body relationship views the knowing

subject to be the mind, while the body is just a mere known object; negating the possibility of 'embodied knowledge' (Descartes). It can be argued that embodied knowledge rejects the claim of the Cartesian dualism and contends that the mind, which lacks a clear representation, is experienced throughout the body and the variety of experiences that one witnesses within the lifeworld, a state Husserl defined as *Lebenswelt*. Through the analysis of the narrative here, one could see the complex interplay of the author's mental state and physical state. The change in one significantly affecting the other.

Intersection of Disability and Gender

While addressing the question of intersectionality, the intersection of disability and gender plays one of the most critical roles for any individual with disability. Starting from the right to live, to the access to healthcare, education, employment opportunities, right to have a romantic relationship, be married or even have a child depends to a great extent on one's gender (Ghai). It is understood that the prevalent traditional gender roles and its expectations make life for women with disability in India more difficult than for their counterpart (Mehrotra). Evidence shows that among older women, their disabilities are often discounted if their spouses are alive. The cultural differences within the country shows that the older women in north India are often enough much more disadvantaged when compared with the same population in the south of the country (Sengupta and Agree). This kind of ignorance or avoidance of the 'disabled woman' can also be seen in the disability movements as well as the women's movements. For the author, her introduction to this intersection became visible after her amputation, when she was added to a women's support group named, 'Wonder Women'. This group of women with disabilities shared almost every aspect of their experience including travel pictures, anecdotes of funny or angering incidents, stories of pain and comfort to even pregnancy concerns like, 'Carrying a pregnancy to term despite other people being mistrustful of their ability to do so'. These women created a space for celebrating their success stories and those of their failures, it gave them a space to be who they are. The author raises critical questions concerning the experiences of women with disabilities, which in its unique sense, is one of restraining women and questioning their capabilities. Be it one's child bearing ability or caregiving skills, domains which are considered to be the quintessential features of any woman are continuously questioned and criticized in the case of women with disabilities. This could be understood in terms of the blatant dehumanization and seizing these women off their femininity, the qualities which makes a woman identify with her gender. The Wonder Women would spend hours together simply to listen to each other, help each other out even though most of these women of the group had never met each other. The author talks about the possibilities that she was able to see as a part of this group and how it helped her embrace her disabled identity (Telang).

The intersection of disability and sexuality in the text has been well addressed by the author, leaving no gaps for incorrect assumptions or second guesses to seep in. In fact, she recalls the first few things that she heard from her relatives after her amputation was not about her health or wellbeing, rather it was concerning the most important facet of marriage. They were whispering, 'Poor thing. Who will marry her now? How long will her family take care of her, after all?'

It was not much later when a young boy she likes suggests her how she would be 'better off moving to places like the UK or France', so that she would be around people who could be more open minded about her 'condition'. The author recalls how the thought of her being undatable in that sense was a much more scarier thought, than her being handicapped. Her fear of getting rejecting and never finding a suitable match led her to completely close herself from all potential romantic endeavors. It was only under the influence of alcohol and some good friends that she finally decided to explore her options, through a dating app. Her experience of dating in a virtual world gave her the opportunity to explore her sexuality, without the fear of her disability being her primary identity. Having met people for dates, she was able to enjoy the company of those who went out with her and her experiences were much similar to those that non disabled woman have. Them accepting her the way she was, gave her the opportunity to accept herself.

Much contrary to the popular perception of disabled individuals as 'asexual' beings, the author's own experiences point towards a series of rather optimistic scenarios where she realized that most people she dated were not bothered by her disability, making her feel much acknowledged and appreciated with statements like, 'It's just one foot right? All the rest is there na?'. She recounts how most of the men she went out with are still good friends with her, after which she entered into a relationship with someone, she met offline.

Ghai, while talking about the relevance of 'language' in the context of disability, quotes Stiker when she says that there is 'no speech outside the systems of languages'. She further states that disability ceases to exist outside the periphery of social and cultural constructions. This would further implicate that attitude towards persons with disability originate from the vast social and cultural references and constructions. Disability as a concept is rooted in the religious texts, folklore, cinema, mythologies, poems, proverbs and riddles (Ghai). In a study conducted by Mapley to examine the representation of disability in the children's book 'Read with Biff, Chipp and Kipper', critical discourse analysis was employed. The study revealed that in the text, 'normalcy' was given high regard and idolised, which resulted in the representation influencing the self identity and social attitudes toward disability. The study particularly highlights the construct of 'aesthetic nervousness' which could be resulting from a normative culture which reprimands anything that deviates from what is considered to be normal. Such hegemonic practices produce a repetitive process that plays a significant role in the production of future texts, social justice and creation of an inclusive society (Mapley). Such cultural expectation is mostly reflected in the beliefs, values held, rituals and customs, thus being partial expressions of a world in which 'dualities of domination/ subordination, superiority/inferiority and normality/abnormality are relentlessly reinforced and legitimized' (Charlton). These learned systems of meaning and behaviour are usually passed from one generation to the next (Carter and Qureshi). Nevertheless, it is important to note here that cultures evolve with their interaction with history, politics and power and thus no culture remains the same over time (Venkatesh). Though disability, much like caste, gender, class, ethnicity is deeply embedded in one's culture, its meaning across the world has been given a 'transcendent status' (Harry). Questions surrounding who is disabled, the kind of treatment they need, their rights and responsibilities have been an intrinsic part of the global discourse on disability (Priestly) (Hutchison).

The author's use of humor in her writings has been another interesting aspect which captures the reader's attention. This can be seen as her defence mechanism to cope with the anxiety provoking events or to fill in the void that she experiences between her lived realities and what others assumed of her. Thirdly, it could also be read as an attempt to bring in her personhood into her writings. The underlying expectation of every disabled story to be a story of hopelessness, sorrow, grief has been contested by the author through her work. This can be seen clearly in her mention of a dramatic music as she unfolds the story of her amputation, her use of sarcasm when she says, 'I was absolutely so very fine' while narrating her efforts of hiding her disability under her long pants to the rest of the world.

While talking about his views on capitalism, Karl Marx contends that any kind of charity is the 'perfume of the sewers of capitalism'. This view stands true for people with disability also, wherein they are often subjected to the bitter/sweet realities of charity in their everyday life (Goodley). Simi Linton, while describing the disability scholarship, states that, 'the overwhelming majority of scholarship on disability either utilises or implies the third person plural: 'they' do this, 'they' are like that, 'they' need such and such (Linton). This contributes to the objectification of disabled people and their experience of being denied of individuality and selfhood, imposing a collective, generalised identity. Various models of disability that have been posed over time has suggested multiple ways of approaching the subject matter of disability.

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Singing Songs, Narrating Lives: Desire and Dissent in Rajbangsi Women's Folksongs

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Abstract: In the nineteenth and twentieth century, the attempt to 'construct' the 'imagined' nation of India, in line with the colonial, modern idea of the nation, resulted in a process of sanitization, appropriation and assimilation directed at the lower caste and tribal communities. However, on delving into the expressive culture of the Rajbangsi women of North Bengal, we encounter a realm of subversive female articulations and practices, offering glimpses into an alternate culture which destabilizes modern notions of decency and morality.

In my paper, I would like to study the oral songs of Rajbangsi women, *bhawaiya* and *chatka*, as narratives of their lives. Through singing they reclaim spaces for assertion of freedom, choice and agency, and challenge patriarchal norms and the dominant stereotype of women as passive victims.

A critical analysis of these songs as narratives through postcolonial feminist theory will shed light on the subversion of the dominant ideals of Indian Hindu womanhood and foreground the emergence of a new kind of female subject.

Keywords: Rajbangsi, life narratives, folksongs, selfhood, femininity, patriarchy, nationalism, Brahminical patriarchy, subversion, womanhood, lived experiences, rebellion

Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the wave of colonialism, nationalism and communalism created a nexus of power within which the female body was the central site of control and domination. The imagination of India as a Hindu nation, and the attempts to 'construct' the national space in line with the colonial, modern idea of the nation, resulted in a process of sanitization, appropriation and assimilation directed at the lower caste and tribal communities. At the centre of this were women and their expressive traditions. Critics like Charu Gupta, Sumanta Banerjee, Partha Chatterjee, Anindita Ghosh et al. have written about this process of curbing female sexual liberation in the nineteenth century. The process is traced back to the introduction of colonial obscenity laws, particularly, The Indian Penal Code of 1860, and the measures taken by the state to curb feminine expressions in the name of culture, sanctity, and decency. Charu Gupta draws attention to the process of redefinition of sexual representations of women in literature as well as popular cultural traditions in the colonial context to construct a modern Hindu nationalist identity (4). She also sheds light on the crucial role of language, literature and print in disseminating dominant ideas and shaping national, regional, and communal consciousness. Therefore, the task of feminist historiographers was rendered more difficult, pushing questions of female desire and sexuality to a realm of silence. Several scholars have been working to find the absent female voice within this discourse. Aparna Bandyopadhyay's work *Desire and Defiance: A Study of Bengali Women in Love 1850-1930*—based on upper caste Bengali women's rebellious acts of love—argues for a different notion of womanhood, one which is resistant, vocal, and assertive. Charu Gupta's book *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* is another important work which contests the dominant narrative of women as complacent victims of the colonial/nationalist patriarchal Brahmanical state.

In this paper, I study the oral songs of Rajbangsi women, *bhawaiya* and *chatka*, as narratives of their lives. There are songs of widows, child brides, young, unmarried women, married women, and extra marital relationships. The subjective, lyrical ‘I’ accords an authentic voice, making women the subjects and narrators of their story. Through singing they reclaim spaces for assertion of freedom, choice and agency, and challenge patriarchal norms and the dominant stereotype of women as passive victims. They represent another arena of culture where we find a divergent picture of femininity than what was espoused within dominant discourses. Bhawaiya are songs of love and desire that transcend the boundaries of heteronormativity and conjugality, which according to Bose are the defining parameters of sexuality in Indian society (x). These songs also offer a critical scrutiny of the two institutions which govern female sexuality— state and marriage. Bose writes, “To reconceptualize the “force-field” of sexuality, it would be necessary, first and foremost, to reconstruct Indian female sexuality as one that could break through the heterosexual/conjugal relationship as the only acceptable norm, and to recognize alternative patterns of sexual behaviour not simply as sites of resistance and rebellion but as possibilities both valid and acceptable” (xiv). We find several of these ‘alternative patterns’ within the vocabulary of the *bhawaiya* songs. Herein we have a voice of critique against dominant ideals of Indian Hindu womanhood (defined by notions of chastity and purity, and constructed as national and cultural symbols) as well as assertion of desires which transgress social norms and conventions, enabling us to envision a divergent world where modern notions of decency and morality are turned on its head.

Rajbangsi Folk Songs and Subversive Subcultures

The Rajbangsis are a social sub group inhabiting, at present, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, Dinajpur and Darjeeling in North Bengal, Goalpara in Assam, and Rangpur in Bangladesh. The community has suffered multiple layers of oppression from the colonial period till the contemporary postcolonial time. As Girindra Narayan Ray points out, there are several conflicts and dualities at the core of the Rajbangsi identity, but through the course of history, they have always occupied a marginalised, subaltern position in society. While Charu Chanda Sanyal sheds light on the colonial discourses of the Rajbangsi tribal identity, Swaraj Basu suggests that the Rajbangsis, along with the Namasudras and Pods, belonged to the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy in Bengal. Despite movements for kshatriyahood within the community, the Rajbangsis continue to be seen as an inferior, lower caste group. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Partition, they suffered further marginalization, leading to the emergence of a lower class Rajbangsi identity. All these elements form a network within which the Rajbangsi identity is constructed as the ‘other’— the tribal other, the lower caste other and the lower class other. And, like all other communities clubbed under the banner of the “lower orders”, the Rajbangsis faced a wave of cultural cleansing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their language, culture and expressive traditions were constructed as inferior, unrefined, backward and vulgar, while the polite, *bhadralok* culture was deemed fit for representing the national tradition. Under these dichotomising forces, the strong assertions of female agency and freedom in *bhawaiya gaan* were labelled as ‘bawdy’; it laid the ground for their erasure and assimilation.

Bhawaiya Gaan are songs of love and emotion. We find a powerful female voice in *bhawaiya gaan*. These songs are mostly sung by Rajbangsi women, and also by the Rajbangsi men who spend most of their days away from home, for work. The element of affect and emotion gains centrestage here. However, a process of sanitization and appropriation of the Rajbangsi folksongs was underway from the nineteenth century onwards, which became more pronounced specifically in the 1950s and 1960s when these songs were played on the radio. Barman sheds light on the prioritization of songs with ‘religious’ content and suppression of the ‘vulgar’ ones dealing with female desire. The various attempts at cleansing and modifying the lyrics of the songs can be seen as an attempt on the part of the middle-class Brahmanical patriarchal state to control the ideological challenge posed by them. The free, powerful expression of desires in *bhawaiya gaan* posed a threat to patriarchy and it

defied the notion of womanhood which was foregrounded in the nationalist movement. In the post-colonial era stretching till our contemporary times, the liberal ethos of *bhawaiya* shatters bhadralok conceptions of culture, politeness, morality, and civilization. The study of *bhawaiya gaan* through the lens of gender and gendered experiences offers us a glimpse into an alternate culture of female assertiveness and agency.

In both western ideas of romantic love as well as Indian notions of conjugality, there was a strict distinction between the domain of sexuality or the erotic and the domain of conjugal domesticity. While the Western tradition idealized the companionate marriage, focusing on the cultivation of the female mind through education (albeit within limits), the Indian thought was predominated by the ideas of *satitva* and *pativrata*. Therefore, the institution of marriage failed to include and address the question of female desire as their status was reduced to the property of the husbands and sexual pleasure was constructed as a duty the wife is to offer the husband. As Charu Gupta points out, there was strict demarcation between sex for reproduction and sex for pleasure. Marriage as an institution regulated power over women's bodies and constituted discourses surrounding female desire, sexuality, and femininity, which became intrinsically related to the image of the nation in the nineteenth and twentieth century. When seen within this historical backdrop, the revolutionary potential of *bhawaiya* songs comes to the surface. Critics are of the opinion that *bhawaiya* are songs of emotion/ 'bhav' and the predominating emotion found here is one of love. However, the idea of love articulated in these songs is not restricted within the purview of the marital institution, instead love here is represented as the unsurmountable force of eros, overflowing social barriers like the tumultuous rivers of North Bengal. One of the most recurring themes in *bhawaiya* is the vocalization of pre-marital and extramarital love. The expression of desire in the female voice towards a man other than the husband holds a radical challenge to the moral and sexual norms of the Bengali Hindu patriarchal society. This vocalization is significant because firstly, it offers an implicit critique of the institution of marriage which fails to recognize female desire, secondly, it represents a strong voice of affirmation and assertion of female sexuality, and thirdly, it contests prevalent notions of womanhood and femininity defined within patriarchal discourses. Partha Chatterjee stated that women in the nineteenth century were confined within the domestic space and ruled by patriarchal nationalist dictates to embody the pure cultural essence of the nation. While it is undeniable that women's bodies were regulated and controlled by the state, through the study of *bhawaiya* folksongs we arrive at a new understanding of women in nineteenth century. The women of *bhawaiya* songs are not victims, rather they are subjects in their own right, narrating their lives through songs in their own voice. Rather than being the edified symbols of the pure Indian culture, the women of *bhawaiya gaan* represent a different portrait of femininity that disrupt and destabilize nationalist constructions. We also find a new conception of love in these songs – sexual, erotic love, which was stigmatized in polite 'bhadralok' society. In the following sections, I will shed light on these varied notions of femininity and love expressed in *bhawaiya gaan*.

Songs of Deviant Love and Desires

Within the larger Hindu nationalist cause of glorification of marriage as the only legitimate, acceptable and true form of love, the effort to develop/create an imagined homogeneous Indian tradition through the sanskritization and sanitisation of 'uncivilized' elements and aspects, and the appropriation and assimilation of popular cultures and rituals of the marginalized, lower castes, lower class and tribes, the valorization of deviant, transgressive love in *bhawaiya* songs gain greater relevance. It contests dominant ideas and foregrounds the different vocabularies of love which were present and practiced by a large section of people. Extra marital love is not stigmatized within the rajbangsi worldview, rather it is an acceptable and common practice. Not only this, as Nasrin Khandekar points out, "Women could get a *thaykna swami* (alternative husband) if her husband left her or died, and the woman could become *Sangalu* (alternative wife or partner) to the new husband"

(113). As opposed to the atmosphere of sexual repression, in the Rajbangsi folk life we find a different cultural picture of female sexual freedom.

Ghorer kaj kamai re mor monot na nagey
I cannot concentrate on my household chores

Kalankini honu re mui jagat sansharey
I have become a disgrace to society

Kemon kori changra tok mui dekhong najarey- mor pran changra re.
How shall I catch a glimpse of you- oh my dear changra?

Mor Hoil pagla swami tore kongey nai
I did not get the chance to tell you that I was married off to a mad man

Hater sakha bhangiya re changra chol paleya jai
Let us run away together, breaking off my wedding bangles

Boidesh geiley o re changra ar toh firibar nong- mor pran changra re.
Once we reach a foreign land, there will be no looking back- my dear changra.

Dolay dolay jao re changra nodir parotey
Swinging my hips, o changra, I go to the river bank

Paichhla firi dekhong ota kay bujhi aishey
Looking back to make sure no one's watching

Jol bhoribar chhol koriya dekhiya aishong toke- mor pran changra re.

I go to the bank to cast my eyes upon you under the pretence of filling my buckets- my dear changra.¹

In this song, a married woman expresses her wish to run away from a loveless marriage. Sexual desire, choice and agency is asserted by the woman, but it is notable that this assertion happens in a non-marital framework. In the context of erasure of sexuality from the sphere of conjugality, this song of extra-marital relationship offers a window on the alternative spaces of female sexual agency. *Bhawaiya gaan* abounds with references to extra-marital love, which can be read as an act of resistance to and transgression of patriarchal dictates. It also challenges the hegemony of conjugal love as the only form of love, and foregrounds extra-marital love as an equal, acceptable, and valid possibility. What is also noticeable is the conflation of conjugal domesticity with chores and labour, while pleasure is sought outside this space with the lover at the riverside. She states that her husband is mad, and she is imprisoned by her 'sakha', the symbol of marriage as well as confinement. Her song represents her suppressed life force (eros) and becomes the space of free unbridled expression. It is also indicated that the marriage is a non-consensual marriage where she was not given any choice. She masquerades her role of a dutiful wife who has come to fetch water in order to steal a glimpse of her 'pran changra'. This sheds light on the everyday acts of resistance by women to assert their agency and sexuality. The oppressive atmosphere of the conjugal house is further intensified by the imagination of 'boidesh' as the land of freedom. The word 'boidesh' means foreign land, the land to which she dreams of going with her lover to establish an equal relationship on her own terms.

Balutey randhinu, balute barinu
I have cooked and spent my life on the sands of this bank

Joley bhashiya dinu Hari
But now I have thrown the pots into the river

Ore biyar swami morley machh bhaat mui khaim re
Oh, I will relish my meals with fish though my husband dies

O bondhu moriley hobo ari.

But in the event of my friend's death, I will renounce all worldly pleasures.

The female subject in this song addresses her lover and tells him of her helplessness and victimhood within the institution of marriage and motherhood. However, through her strong assertion of desire

and will, she transcends the status of a victim and becomes the agent of her own actions. She says she'll not observe any austerity or rituals of widowhood if her husband dies but will be shattered the day her lover passes away. Through this vocalization, she rejects the patriarchal ownership of her husband and asserts her desire and emotions for her lover. Here we see a dismantling of the equation between marriage and love. Bandopadhyay writes, "In the proliferating discourses on conjugality, marriage was also portrayed as a spiritual union of souls, and a harmonious fusion of body and mind, with the wife deemed the man's *ardhangini* (the half body of the husband) and *sahadharmini* (co-practitioner of religious and spiritual duties). The sexual and procreative aspects of conjugality were subordinated to its more profound spiritual goals" (8). Such overriding of the sexual with the spiritual pushed the question of female sexual needs and desires to a sea of silence. *Bhawaiya gaan* offers a sharp critique of it, and foregrounds alternate narratives of female sexual assertions outside the purview of the marital institution.

Since the *garhiyals* (cart pullers), *moishals* (buffalo herders and cattle rearers), and *mahouts* (elephant herders), travelled to faraway places for work, their wives would be left behind at home with their in-laws. This confined them to a life of sacrifice and duty, while being denied any conjugal happiness or intimacy with the husband. Their lives were often controlled by the power holders in the family. So, in many *bhawaiya songs*, the domestic space is depicted as oppressive, restrictive, dull, monotonous, and full of drudgery. In one song, the woman narrates how her life is regulated by the *sasuri* (mother-in-law) and *nanodi* (sister-in-law), who are the mouthpieces of patriarchy.

In this context, songs about the '*deora*' (brother-in-law) are significant. Commenting on 'devar-bhabhi' relationships in the context of nineteenth and twentieth century Uttar Pradesh, Charu Gupta stressed on the lightheartedness, joy, and lack of restraint in it as opposed to the "restrained relationship shared with the husband". This she says was because the '*devar*', being the younger brother of the husband, was the only one equal to her in status and rank in the household. Emotional dependence and flirtation defined such relationships (155). She further provides historical reasons for the growth of devar-bhabhi relationships in the process of migration:

The joint family was ruptured, and women were frequently forced to live in oppressive households, without their husbands. Male migration increased the responsibilities of women... Loneliness probably led many women to seek solace in other relationships, and the chances of getting close to their younger brother-in-law were high... The devar-babhi attraction seems to have been fairly common and it was one of the ways in which women undercut their pativrata images. (Gupta 154-155).

In the song titled, '*Bhabar deora*' we find an example of the 'devar-bhabhi' relationship. The metaphor of cooking is used to explicate the dynamic and emotional economy of the woman's relation to the *bhasur* (elder brother-in-law), *sasur* (father-in-law), *deora*, and husband. The song delineates how the woman cooks the fish brought by the *deora* with utmost care and love. The flirtatious nature of their relationship is evident. The '*bhabar deora*' fish is crisply fried by her, suggesting possibly the simmering, flavourful nature of their relationship, because she invites him to partake in that meal with a gesture from her bedside, and serves it to him herself, sitting in close physical proximity to him. The erotic strands of the song can be unravelled within the culinary details laid out there. It is remarkable how on one hand it successfully draws attention to women's household chores like cooking which generally do not find visibility, and on the other hand, it also invests the domestic space with a new meaning, through which it transforms from an oppressive space to a space which is being controlled by women in multifarious ways to assert their agency. The woman of the song does not break free from patriarchal structures, but resists it from within, carving out spaces and relationships marked by equality and freedom. Commenting on the transgressive potential of such songs, Charu Gupta writes, "It hints at how women were sometimes subverting expected behaviour and the dominance of husbands, how they were creating their own spaces for leisure and pleasure" (155).

Within the historical context of the Rajbangsis, several songs of longing and lament, evoking the emotions of the *biraha* rasa, are sung by the wives who are left behind at home by their husbands, who

travel faraway for earning their livelihood. Their longing, like love, is material and physical rather than spiritual or purely emotional. Here the figure of the wife is not sacrificial, dutiful, and desexualised, rather she is vocal about her deprivation, articulative of her desires and pain. She is not the object of her husband's desire, rather she is the desiring subject in these songs. Within the conservative moral framework of nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal, a female asserting her sexuality and articulating her desires is a radical act of defiance. Such expressions are significant in the instrumentalization of agency.

Tola matir kola doyel re jemon holpol holpol kore
Like plucked bananas ripen with sweetness, oh bird

Oi moto sonar joibon dine dine barey re
My golden youth simmers with each passing day

The subject of this song is a lonely, young wife left behind at home by the husband for work. She is singing of her loneliness, longings, and desires. She identifies with the caged *doyel* (oriental magpie-robin) in her house and is singing to her about her sexual desires which she cannot express in front of any other person. The situation is one of entrapment in a loveless marriage defined only by duty and domesticity. In her voicing of sexual desires, there is a critique of the conventional understanding of marriage. Not only is her desire asserted and expressed here, but also a symbolic act of protest is registered, firstly, through her singing, and secondly, through the act of releasing the caged bird at the end of the song. Setting free of the bird can be read as a symbolic act of her own freedom from her claustrophobic household. By comparing the house to a cage where sexual fulfilment cannot be found, there is an implicit subversive tone in the song which suggests that the domestic space is restrictive towards women, and in order to attain sexual liberation and fulfilment one has to transgress and transcend its boundary, just like the *doyel* bird needs to be released from its cage.

In various other songs, the singing subject (in most songs, the subjects are married women) longs for sexual union with the husband and this is remarkable because conventionally we do not see women as desiring subjects, but only as objects of male desire. Such a portrait of a wife is hard to find in dominant or higher forms of literature around the nineteenth and twentieth century. A Hindu wife would conventionally be expected to stay loyal and faithful to her husband, even in his absence or in the event of his death. By articulating how difficult it is for the wife to suppress her desires, these songs subvert the idyllic ideas of loyalty and fidelity which define wifedom. Though alone and deprived, the women of bhawaiya gaan are not victims but subjects and agents of their lives. In the absence of tangible opportunities to attain freedom and realize their aspirations, these women narrate their stories and, in the process, attain their subjecthood:

nishar seshey doyel kandey re
the robin cries through the night

khohey kandey payra
the pigeons weep in their cage

basanto chhariya jay re
the spring of my life withers away

o mor barey joibon jala re
and my body burns with passion...

joiboner srotey sona re
my body is afloat

bhashiya jay mor gao
on a sea of desires

koto diney baniye geichen re
so long ago you had gone away on business

sona deshay firan na chao.
my love, won't you return home?

Defiant Voices: Songs of Single Women, Wives, Child Brides and Widows

One of the first Rajbangsi folksongs, documented by Grierson in his *The Linguistic Survey of India*, foregrounds the female voice and gendered experience of desire. Unlike the conventional image of a single, unmarried woman veiled within norms of chastity, purity and honour, we meet a desiring subject in the song:

Bapok na kao saromey mui maok na kao lajey,
Out of shame, I do not speak of my desires to my parents

Dhiki dhiki tushir oghun joleche dehar majhey,
The embers of fire are still burning in my body

...

Kohey kobe kalankini hani naik mor tatey,
Let society think I'm morally depraved, there's no harm in that

Moner sadhey korim keli pati niya sathe,
I will do as I wish with my chosen lover (Grierson 185)

"*Hosti re choran hosti re noran*" ("Oh elephant herder, you rear and move with the elephants") is another popular song about non-marital love. It sheds light on temporary, non-institutional, passionate, spontaneous love relationship between a *mahout* and a woman he meets by the Champa river. It opens up possibilities of imagining the relationship as subversive of chastity norms for unmarried women as well as ideals of 'strisvavaba' and 'pativrata'. The question, "*Ore sotto koriya kon re mahout/ Ghar a koi jon nari re*" (Oh elephant herder, tell me honestly how many wives you have back home), is indicative of divergent marriage practices within the Rajbangsi community. Not only was the practice of polygamy common taking a '*thaykna swami*' (the practice of a woman choosing a live-in partner for herself in case one's husband passes away or leaves them), becoming 'sangalu' (a woman who lives with a man outside the bounds of matrimony) were rampant within the community. All these indicate a much more relaxed and gender equal culture which acknowledged the importance of both male and female sexuality.

Even though marital and sexual norms were more relaxed within the Rajbangsi community, patriarchy was prevalent. There are numerous songs which narrativise different forms of unjust practices and the plight of women.

Oho re baap ma a bacheya khaiche swami pagela re.
Oh my parents have sold me off in marriage to a mad man

Lokey jemon mayna re poshey pinjiray bhoiya
As people keep maynas imprisoned in cages

Oho re oi moto narir joibon rakhechong bandhiya re.
So have I kept my youthful womanhood tied down, suppressed.

In several songs we come across the term '*bacheya khaiche*'; it is used to denote a specific kind of marriage, where the father gives his daughter in marriage to a man in return for a sum of money. This kind of marriages were prevalent among the poor who could not afford dowry and hence were incapable of getting their daughters married at an earlier age or to suitable men. These marriages were also used as a means to secure money. It is a transaction (economic/financial as well as sexual) between the father and the husband- the representative figures of male authority, and the woman is reduced to a pawn in that interchange. No surprise, therefore, that the subjects compare themselves to caged birds, trapped in loveless, non-consensual marriage with mad husbands. The absence of sexual fulfilment in such marriages of convenience is hardly a concern for the rest of the society, but in the voice of the singing subject not only do we hear a critique of that attitude, but also an assertion of her desires outside the restrictive framework of marriage. They sing to their lovers and tell them about their repressed desires.

The ideal portrait of marriage is punctured in numerous songs through the depiction of inequalities and unjust practices like domestic violence.

Oki o sangna marilu kene

Hey why did you beat me up, o husband

Bhater dukhye ore sangna kainor boshinu mui

I was crying out of hunger in the corner of the house

Kon doshetey duar bandhiya marilu aji tui.

For what fault of mine did you break open the door and suddenly hit me today.

Puber ghare marite marite randhon gharote anilu

Thrashing me from the east hut you brought me to the kitchen

Bhaat randha hari patil nyadeya bhangilu

And kicked the rice pot to the ground

Mok marilu bhaley korilu chhaoak marilu kene

Yet I silently accepted your beating; why did you still beat up my child

Chhoya-barun nagaim aji tor sangnar kopaley.

I will punish you, husband, by not permitting any physical intimacy in bed tonight.

Nin hatey dakey tuliya ponta khoanu toke

I woke you up and fed you the panta bhaat

Kolar chhaoa mor kandiya aakul

While my little child lay crying and restless

Oi na Peter bhokey.

Due to hunger.

Raitot ela tamsha dekhim bichhanat thakitey

I will now have the last laugh when we go to bed

Nitti pujar thakur aji tor thakibe upashey.

As the daily satiated appetite of your lord (phallus) will be left unfed.

The reference to ‘sangna’ here suggests that it is not a normative marriage being depicted in this song. The word ‘sangna’ refers to a man with whom a woman lives together, without sharing a legitimate marital bond. While this is indicative of an active, agential subject hood, as the narrative of the song suggests, even such unconventional relationships which were not controlled by the state and its institutions, could not escape the stranglehold of patriarchal dominance. The subject is singing of her experience of suffering domestic violence at the hands of her lover/husband. What stands out, however, is her challenge and resistance to his abusive behaviour. She does not submit to his beating, nor does she express any sense of fear, rather we see her boldly questioning him, “*Kon doshetey duar bandhiya marilu aji tui*”. Through her words, she paints a detailed picture of his violent act, forcing him to see and reflect on it. The song ends with her rising and snatching the power away from the abuser, as she declares her decision to deny him sexual pleasure in bed as a punishment for this act. In spite of being abused and beaten, she does not relinquish control; the fight which is initiated by the lover/husband in the domestic space is carried over by her to the marital bed. And there, she does not comply to the role of the dutiful wife who unquestioningly fulfils the husband’s sexual needs, but she asserts her agency and refuses to indulge in an unequal sexual relationship. The woman in this song is therefore strong willed, who asserts her agency and choice in her social as well as sexual life.

Though the Rajbangsi community had its own distinct customs, there were certain regressive practices like child marriage which were prevalent in this community too. As described by Bandopadhyay, the custom of child marriage was seen as a necessity to control wayward female sexuality and to deny them of any choice in marriage. There are several *bhawaiya* folksongs which expose these patriarchal ideals and challenge the hegemony of the institution of marriage. We hear the voice of child brides and child widows narrating their experiences of oppression, sexual repression, pain, and suffering.

Naiyare nao chapao ghatay
 O boatman, moor your boat
Ore Kankher kolosh khali re thuiya
 Leaving behind the kolshi from my waist
Amra jamo sathe re.
 We will flee/escape together.
Ore bidhata koriya diche mok
 By God's will I have become
Kancha chuler aari re.
 A child widow.

Here a child widow entreats her lover, the boatman, to listen to her painful experience. The source of suffering, however, is not the death of her husband, but her unfulfilled sexual desires. She suggests her willingness to leave behind her conjugal home and go away to 'desh' with her lover. '*Kankher kolosh*', the water pitcher, here becomes the symbol of domesticity from which she wants to wrest herself. She invites her lover to spend the night with her in her 'ghar', implicitly indicating her desire for sexual consummation of their relationship. The underlying sexual overtone of the song hints towards the lack of female sexual fulfilment in the marriage. Girls would be married off before the onset of the menstrual cycle to older men, leading them to be entrapped in loveless marriages where the only legitimate sexual act was sex for reproduction. The pain and desire of the subject in this song can be read within this context as a critique of the system of child marriage. Not only does it crush down the idea that it leads to a stable and true love, but also highlights the sexual repression that women were subjected to. It is significant that the death of the husband is not perceived by her as an occasion of sorrow, rather it is seen as a moment of freedom, autonomy, and agency. In the death of the husband, she finds a voice to finally sing of her lived experience of neglect and suffering. It also provides us with a different figure of the widow – assertive and defiant of social norms of sexual and social austerity.

Bandopadhyay points out, "The non-marital relationships of widows – their relationships outside and/or not oriented towards marriage – were a persistent source of concern even after the legalisation of marriage [of widows] in 1856 ... Saradaprasad Chakravarty, in his letter to a journal named *Somprakash*, identified widowhood as an important factor that led women astray (Chakravarty 1866). After losing her husband, he argued, a woman was initially overwhelmed with grief, but eventually her senses, especially her libido, got the better of her" (2-3). The central preoccupation, as we can see, is still with the uncontrollable sexual libido of women, which is seen as representative of a wild, primitive energy in need of the civilizing, modernizing control of the colonial/nationalistic patriarchal state. This control, no doubt, is asserted through the expansion of the snares of the hegemony of the institution of marriage. The songs of widows in *bhawaiya* are significant because here we find the authentic voice of the widows, rather than other expert voices commenting on and debating about the problems of widowhood. The overwhelming sense of lament expressed in these songs play a dual role; firstly, there is lamentation for the loss of the husband, but more importantly, we have an extreme sense of lamentation for the loss of a life of freedom, pleasure and fulfilment. In *bhawaiya*, marriage is not perceived as a spiritual union of souls, but as numerous songs elucidate, marriage is seen as a space for the physical union of bodies, for the satiation of irrepressible sexual desires. While the state used marriage as an institution for regulating female sexuality, many Rajbangsi women looked upon and used marriage as one of the means to release their sexual energy and fulfil their erotic desires. Widowhood would be agonizing because it entails the loss of that space of pleasure.

These songs enable us to see the widow as an autonomous individual, and not merely as the wife/widow of another. Bandopadhyay points out that women were expected to remain loyal to their husbands even after their death, through the observance of austere rules. Such norms define women's identity in relation to the male husband and reduce their status to properties whose ownership lies in the hands of another. These songs offer us a glimpse into the other side of the story, showing these

widows as individuals with desires, needs and aspirations, as well as human beings who feel hurt and pain (not objects to be owned and used by men).

(ore) moriya geiche mor biyar swami,

Oh, my husband has passed away

Bandichong mon mui kotoi kori,

I have tried to restrain the desires of my heart

Banda chhilo mor narir mon dilen auliya.

I was stone hearted, but now you have surged my repressed desires

This song unravels a divergent picture of widowhood. Rather than the tone of lament, here we find a lighthearted, flirtatious encounter between a widow and her lover. It is described in terms of an act of freeing from confinement: “*Banda chhilo mor narir mon dilen auliya*”. The libidinal energy of this relationship is pregnant with disorderly, destructive force, emphasised in the word ‘auliya’ which means to render unruly and chaotic. Widowhood, therefore, is imagined in terms of freedom and agency, where she defies the role of wife and mother to assert her individuality and choice as a woman. She chooses her lover and meets him secretly, away from the surveilling eyes of her patriarchal household. This act of agency, it may be imagined, is possible because of the death of the husband and the loosening of his grasp on her life which stifled her subjecthood. That is why, rather than being a song of lament, widowhood here becomes a celebration of her sexuality and choice.

Conclusion

Anindita Ghosh writes about “a backdrop of ‘invisible’ but consistent gendered resistance against which to map the more well-known outbursts of the organised radical feminist movement, or of outstanding female public figures” (4). She stresses on the importance of delving into and exploring the everyday struggles and acts of dissent of individual, ordinary women, rather than always valorising acts which are collective, organizational and systemic in bringing about social and political changes or giving rise to mass movements. The female voice in bhawaiya represents one such instance of the ‘everyday’ struggles and transgressions of women. Their resistance constitutes in the intention as well as the aftermath of their actions, which enables them to snatch and reclaim spaces and time, though transitory, where they can assert their freedom, choice and agency. Though restrictive, these moments attain transcendental significance in the history of feminism. They stand as exemplars challenging and mocking the dominant patriarchal stereotype that depicts women only as passive victims. These narratives unfold an unseen, unread chapter of history, where women were active agents, working towards challenging patriarchal norms, rather than waiting passively for male saviours to come to their rescue.

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Notes

- ¹ This original song along with all other subsequent songs quoted in this paper are taken from the anthology of bhawaiya gaan, collected by Harish Pal, and published in 1973. The translations have been done by the author of the paper.

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Science, Medicine, and Gender Politics in Colonial Bengal: A Reading of Gretchen Green's Memoir *The Whole World & Company*

MADHUMITA ROY

Abstract: Following Nancy Miller's theoretical underpinning(s) related to the construction of the idea of autobiography that emphasizes on how the politics of gender is rivetted with the genre of autobiography, this study attempts to read the memoir of Gretchen Green, *The Whole World & Company*, and try to reformulate the discourse of science where narratives by women are categorically suppressed. Gretchen Green was an American paramedic-cum-nurse who came to Santiniketan when Rabindranath Tagore was in dire need of a dedicated medical worker to serve the villages that came under his project of rural reconstruction. In her memoir, Green excavates her past and provides a detailed picture of her stay and work at the poet's rural reconstruction project. In 1921, she left America and joined Institute of Tropical Medicine in London for her formal training in nursing and midwifery. In 1922, she joined Sriniketan. Her primary responsibility was to establish a health centre in a nearby village, and create health awareness among the rural women.

The purpose of this paper is to closely examine the memoir and reconstruct a history of science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Santiniketan whose discursive contours are largely defined and constructed by eminent male teachers as well as prolific writers of science, for instance, Jagadananda Roy, Tejeshchandra Sen, Pramathanath Sengupta and others. Rabindranath's own interest towards science was largely qualified by his friendship with scientists like Jagadish Chandra Bose, Prafulla Chandra Ray, and even P.C. Mahalanabish. Unfortunately, if we look at the study as well as cultivation of science within the space of Santiniketan, a prominent dearth of women's participation is felt. Santiniketan becomes a microcosmic representation of the larger scenario of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal where science was largely considered to be a male prerogative and women were systematically kept at the fringes when the praxis of scientific education was concerned.

Keywords: Memoir, science, medicine, gender, politics, discourse.

I cannot believe that I am leaving India . . . On the housetop for the last time the serpent lamps flickered on teak and lacquer and brass. For the last time the bullocks galloped to Santiniketan . . . It seemed incredible the night could be the last . . . Impossible to stay upon the housetop, I ran to the ground again, and walked in the fragrance of the *nim* grove. In the Tree House I could see the Poet writing. I climbed the swinging steps and said, "It is for the last time." (Green 177-78)

Gretchen Green was so deeply attached to Rabindranath's Santiniketan that her decision to leave the place forever was not easy at all. A deep sense of pain lingers as she recalls her final day at Santiniketan. Gretchen Green's sudden departure from Santiniketan at a crucial stage was very unfortunate for the rural community which was recovering from age-long stupor and becoming active under her guidance. Green was their "mai", a mother figure who not only assumed the role and responsibility of a care giver but also relentlessly acted as a constant source of inspiration for the women of Santiniketan and the neighbouring villages. The purpose of this paper is to closely exam-

ine Green's memoir, *The Whole World & Company* (1936), and reconstruct a history of science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Santiniketan whose discursive contours are largely defined and constructed by eminent male teachers as well as prolific writers of science, for instance, Jagadananda Roy, Tejeshchandra Sen, Pramathanath Sengupta and others. Rabindranath's own interest towards science was largely qualified by his friendship with scientists like Jagadish Chandra Bose, Prafulla Chandra Ray, and even P.C. Mahalanabish. Unfortunately, if we look at the study as well as cultivation of science within the space of Santiniketan, a prominent dearth of women's participation is felt. Santiniketan becomes a microcosmic representation of the larger scenario of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal where science was largely considered to be a male prerogative and women were systematically kept at the fringes when the praxis of scientific education was concerned.

The diffusion of Western education and ideas in nineteenth century Bengal resulted in the formation and consolidation of middle-class Bengali intelligentsia who brought in new reformist zeal in almost every sphere of the society. Of all the other missions, the need to educate the women and construct a "reformed female subjectivity" was realized immediately (Sen 176). Thus, several efforts to introduce education in the innermost quarters of a Bengali household were seen since the beginning of the century. The historians, who have worked in the area of *strisiksha* or female education, like Tanika Sarkar, contends that before the turn of nineteenth century the issue of female education was not at all discussed. While quoting Adam's Second Report on the State of Education in Bengal, Sarkar explains that female education was a threat to the society primarily due to the superstition that education would bring widowhood. In addition to that, there was the latent fear that an educated and hence, empowered woman would not show an unmitigated devotion to the social dictates. Rather, she is likely to question her confinement within four walls in the name of domesticity, and challenge the double standard dictates of a patriarchal society (Sarkar 157). Hence, the history of women's education is interspersed with several arguments, debates, and remarkable splits in the then society.

The first school for women was founded by a missionary, Robert May, in 1818. Between 1823-1828, Mary Ann Cook established a number of girls' schools with the assistance of Church Missionary Society. Nevertheless, these schools could elicit very little response from the elites of Calcutta. The rigid observance of the *Purdah* system as well as a deeply rooted fear of conversion prevented them to send their daughters to such schools. Ghulam Murshid even points out that the reformist thinkers like Rammohan Roy and Radhakanta Dev, who preached the idea of women liberation, were reluctant to send their own daughters to such schools. Hence, girls belonging to low caste families like Bagdi, Byadh, Bairagi and those of the prostitutes went to those schools (Murshid 14).

Apart from the sporadic efforts of the missionary societies, the formal inauguration of Victoria Girls' School in 1849, later renamed as Bethune School, proved to be an important landmark in the history of female education. Though Bethune had a committee of respectable Hindus like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Kalikrishna Dev, Harachandra Ghosh, and others, still very few respectable families allowed their daughters to attend the school. The conservative Bengali periodicals played vicious role in defaming the school as well as its students. One such journal was *Chandrika O Prabhakar*, which offered piquant criticism marked with obscenity. It said: "If respectable Hindu gentlemen want to turn their wives into prostitutes, who can prevent that? Not us . . . on the contrary, we would love to visit these schools when night falls and set tests to these female students" (qtd. In Sarkar 169). Another conservative newspaper, *Samacharchandika* presumed the male teachers as potent threats to the girl students: "If young girls are sent off to schools, they might be deflowered since lust-stricken men would never let them alone" (qtd. in Sarkar 170).

It is to be considered that a number of factors were actually contributing to the stunted growth of female education in the first half of nineteenth century. The prevalent social customs, like, early marriage and observance of the *purdah*, the lack of female teachers in schools, and the fear of social ostracism were always there that made the Bengali middle-class families quite hesitant to send their

daughters to school. Therefore, the emphasis was more on the schemes of *antahpur* education. Ghulam Murshid provides a list of women like Kailashbashini Devi, Kumuduni, Brahmamayi, Jnanadanandini Devi who were taught by their husbands at home (18). The second half of nineteenth century saw a rise of women voice asserting their right to education. A number of societies were popping up which addressed the issue of women liberation of which the foundation of the *Bamabodhini Sabha* in 1863 by Umesh Chandra Dutta and Bejoy Krishna Goswami is worth mentioning. The mouth-piece of the society, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, which ran for sixty years (1863-1922), emerged as a significant platform where writings by women on various issues including the issue of female education were published. Apart from inviting articles by women, the journal also announced an essay competition for women in its 1874 issue on interesting topics such as “The benefits that can be expected from women’s education, and the evil effects of not educating them” or “The harmful customs and superstitions that need to be eradicated before the women of our country can improve their status”. Madhumati Mukhopadhyay of Shaligram wrote the most appraised article on female education, which was published in the 1865 issue of the journal. She seriously comments on the importance of women’s education and perceives education as the way to learn good conduct. According to her, a literate wife can run her household more systematically and raise her children properly. Education teaches women how to be docile before her husband and her in-laws. She also mentions that an enlightened woman may write and earn but most part of her essay concentrates to evaluate education as a training to become a good housewife and a better mother (31-32). Thus, a dual and complicated stance is noted in Madhumati’s non-urban voice, which realizes the importance of education for women but does not attempt to question and transgress the rigid patriarchal social codes. Another conservative article, “Strishiksha-Pranali” (The Methods of Women’s Education, 1874) contends that men possess the ability to deduce knowledge from the intense theories of science and literature but women are not eligible for higher intellectual exercises. The sole aim of the amount of education available to the women is to prune them as daughters, wives, and mothers. Such an argument points out to the major demand of the era for a separate curriculum for women. The heated debates over what should be the ideal curriculum for women caused a rift in Bramho Samaj too. This essay prescribes subjects like Bengali prose and poetry, grammar and composition, history, geography, mathematics and science for women. Interestingly, the author instructs that science teaching should be complemented with a compulsory understanding of God and the glory of his creation (134-38). This conscious choice of coupling modern science with religion hints at the patriarchal strategy of obstructing a rational outlook in women, which would otherwise lead them to question their position in the society. *Bamabodhini* prepared the stage for educating girls at home and published a five-year syllabus to promote the scheme. Moreover, it strongly asserted the need to establish Teacher’s Training Institutes for women, and kept statistical records of the number of girls’ schools in districts, the *antahpur* schools along with the “number of entrants and successful examinees in both formal and home-based schools” (Sen 179). However, at the same time, it consciously published the conservative writings demanding a suitable education for women, a kind of education that would help them not to deviate from their social roles. There were significant women voices like that of Prasannatara Gupta, Kulabala Devi expressing doubt whether the newly educated women would still abide by the social customs or not. *Bamabodhini* became a mirror of the contemporary society, which fashioned the subjectivity of new woman but always underlined the importance of controlling them. It granted their right to education but set limits in their curriculum. As Krishna Sen asserts, “The newly articulated liberation discourses in fact contoured the paradigm of woman in more demanding ways than ever before. The educated, upper-class/caste woman, whose badge of difference from her lower-class/caste sisters was her literacy and “liberated” access to companionate marriage, must now please as well as serve her man” (Sen 185). However, the importance of the journals like *Bamabodhini* lies in the fact that they encouraged women to raise their voice, and express themselves in print media. The rise of such periodicals and along with it, the increasing availability of literate women who could act as teachers, and above all the demand of educated wives

led to an unprecedented growth of female schools and girl students in the second half of nineteenth century. Ghulam Murshid provides the statistical Report on Public Instruction in Bengal, which shows that in 1863, the number of girls' schools was ninety-five, and girl students was two thousand four hundred and eighty-six. In 1890, there were two thousand two hundred and thirty-eight schools and more than seventy-eight thousand girls were enrolled as students (20). However, it can be clearly identified that the policies of educating the womenfolk were not framed without a purpose. Almost every thinker, who was behind this project, was aware of the fact that education would shape women according to the demand of the newly educated men. As Partha Chatterjee clarifies, the new woman, educated and groomed, was "subject to a new patriarchy" (127). Most of the articles, including those by women, reflected the ideology that women should be taught embroidery, cooking, hygiene along with some basic sciences, arithmetic and language which would refine their tastes and make them better partners, better mothers, and better housewives. Murshid puts forward the limitations of various women thinkers of nineteenth century regarding the idea of women liberation. While most of them demanded their right to education, very few could perceive education as a significant route to employment.

Partha Chatterjee in his essay "The Nation and its Women" finds this tendency to preserve the tradition as a dominant one in the discourse of nineteenth century nationalism. The strong objection regarding the higher studies for women, or even women employment and a parallel reinforcement of the social duties and responsibilities of women actually resulted from a complicated strategy of the native intelligentsia who tried to shape a separate curriculum for women. Taking his cue from Sumit Sarkar's analysis of the nineteenth century ideology of reform, he points out:

The Renaissance reformers . . . were highly selective in their acceptance of liberal ideas from Europe. Fundamental elements of social conservatism such as the maintenance of caste distinctions and patriarchal forms of authority in the family, acceptance of the sanctity of the *sāstra* (scriptures), preference for symbolic rather than substantive changes in social practices all these were conspicuous in the reform movements of the early and mid-nineteenth century. (117)

While considering this matter of selection in the ideal of reform, Chatterjee probes deeper into the realms of history to locate the woman question, and the reason why the emphasis on tradition was always gaining ground whenever the issue of modernizing the native women came in. He argues that the Indian women, oppressed and confined, were always cited by the colonial masters to justify their "orderly, lawful, and rational procedures of governance" that stood in stark contrast to the "barbaric" social customs of the Indian society, supported by their religious scriptures too (118). Thus, the condition of the women became a seat for the colonizer's sympathy and hence, was strategically used to justify their act of subordination. It became very easy for them to criticize an entire tradition, which actually supported the project of colonialism founded with a purpose of "civilizing" the East. In response to this, a counter ideology of nationalism developed. The discourse of nationalism identified two separate sections in the cultural sphere—the material and the spiritual. Trying to explain the argument further, Chatterjee says,

The claims of Western civilization were the most powerful in the material sphere. Science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft—these had given the European countries the strength to subjugate the non-European people and to impose their dominance over the whole world. To overcome this domination, the colonized people had to learn those superior techniques of organizing material life and incorporate them within their own cultures. (119–120)

However, the same ideology claims the superiority of the spiritual domain of the East. Hence, the distinctiveness of the national culture is to be preserved in the spiritual domain, which must be left untainted by the Western influences. The spiritual/material divide led to the formation of other binaries such as inner/outer, and home/world. It can be clearly assumed that the "world" was meant to be dominated by the masculine whereas the "home" stood for the spiritual domain, to be contoured by the feminine. This also explains why the nineteenth century literature attempted to parody

the westernized Bengali women. The new woman shaped by the new patriarchy was granted a status of superiority. She was educated and culturally refined, but at the same time possessed the essential, feminine virtues like “chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience, and the labours of love” (129). Consequently, education for women was perceived as training for them so that they could adjust according to the demands of the outer, material world but at the same time retain their traditional values. Therefore, the project of educating the Indian women was always punctuated with significant prescriptions for women regarding their code of conduct.

Women’s entry into the arena of public health as medical professionals did not happen with ease. Geraldine Forbes argues that the issue of female health, especially, the process of birthing was highlighted by the women missionaries, which got the support of the Western educated middle class Indian women. The problem of “high maternal and infant mortality rates” was addressed with the establishment of “lying-in hospitals, nursing homes, new female wards in older hospitals, and institutions specifically designed to train female doctors and nurses” (80). The ambience of the inner quarters or the *zenana* of the Bengali household was significantly marked by orthodoxy. A very primitive process of birthing was followed, where the mother and the new-born were kept in a secluded parlour. Even in cases of complicated delivery, no male doctors were allowed. The entire process of childbirth was supervised by the midwives or the *dhais*, who had no formal training. By mid-nineteenth century, a class of elite Bengali intellectuals responded to the Western mode of treatment and abandoned the age-old custom “of secluding the new mother and her baby in an unventilated, filthy outhouse or side room” (84). However, the transformation of the entire traditional process of childbirth in a Bengali household was possible due to the intervention of the missionary women who had access to the inner apartments/quarters where they taught and got first-hand knowledge of Indian household. They felt a strong urge for lady-doctors and proper training schemes for the midwives to arrest the untimely deaths during childbirth. In 1869, Clara Swain, MD & a member of the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church (USA) came. There were many projects initiated by the wives of the Viceroys and supported by the government to improve the condition of female health in India. The efforts of Lady Dufferin were significant. The Dufferin Fund begun in 1885. Its chief purposes were “providing medical tuition to doctors, hospital assistants, nurses and midwives; medical relief through dispensaries, female wards, female doctors and female hospitals; and training nurses and midwives” (86). One of its targets was also to train the native women, particularly the *dhais*. It provided scholarships to train Indian women in England. There is no doubt that such trainings opened up several possibilities for the Indian women to gain financial autonomy, but, the amount of discrimination and social ostracism that women faced while pursuing a degree of medicine or a training in midwifery was no less. Chitra Dev shows how women, irrespective of their nationality, struggled hard to ensure their admission into medical college and received severe condemnation. The plight of Elizabeth Blackwell in the 1840’s America was no less in comparison to our Abala Das, who could not enroll in Calcutta Medical College and so went to Madras to study medicine. Unfortunately, she could not complete her studies (Dev 62). There are instances of women doctors, like Virginia Mary Mitter, who gave up their practice after marriage (Forbes 113). Chitra Dev interestingly mentions the case of Dr. James Barry, a woman, who enrolled herself in Edinburgh University to study medicine in the disguise of a male candidate. She gained enormous success in surgery and practiced for many years, but could not discard her disguised identity (38). Kadambini Ganguly, the first Indian woman doctor faced scathing attack by the then orthodox Bengali periodical, *Bangabasi*. In 1891, it published an article where the author “accused her of being a whore” (qtd. in Karlekar WS 27). Kadambini achieved her BA degree from Calcutta University in 1882. She decided to pursue medicine in the same University but her admission into the course was not at all a smooth journey. Malavika Karlekar reports, “Though Kadambini passed in all the written papers for the final medical examination, she failed in one essential component of the practicals. Instead of the MB degree, she was awarded in 1886 a GBMC (Graduate of Bengal Medical College), which nonetheless gave her the right to practice”

(qtd. in WS 27). Despite her competence as a medical professional, she had to face severe discrimination in her career. Geraldine Forbes mentions her complaint that the Dufferin Fund “favoured foreign women over Indian women. *The Bengalee* grumbled that high positions in the Duff Fund were reserved for European and Eurasian women” (112). The Indians had to accept meagre salaries and thus, faced humiliation. Moreover, Kadambini was ostracized in her own society. It is true that Kadambini's plight as a lady-doctor firmly establishes the tragedy of Indian women in medicine. However, it is quite assuring that there is a proper documentation of her contribution in the history of Indian medicine. But, what about those thousands of trained midwives who were assisting the male doctors or those hospital assistants trained at the Campbell Medical School who were posted in the district hospitals of Bengal? In the erasure of their names from the history of medicine in India, one cannot but sense a constant working of categorization that prioritized some while silencing many voices. In fact, western medicine was a Janus-faced reality for Indian women. On one hand, it created a liberating space for them, identified the need of training Indian women, addressed the issue of female health in India, and demanded reformation, while on the other, it operated in subjugating the natives under colonial control more effectively. The traditional *dhais* were not accommodated within the system, but were severely criticized and castigated. The native lady-doctors had to accept low positions, meagre salaried works and constant discrimination within a framework that always proclaimed the superiority of their European colleagues. We cannot deny the fact that the Western medicinal discourses and its practicing frameworks in India perpetuated the colonial and patriarchal hegemony which decided to what extent women were to be trained, who were to be included within the system and who were to be marginalized. Indian women were actually safe baits in the Empire's vicious political game of subordination.

Gretchen Green was the daughter of an American preacher whose family endorsed the idea of rendering service to community and people. Right from her childhood, Green had harboured deep love and sympathy for mankind. Always eager to help people in distress, she began her social work at Philadelphia. Soon she met and befriended Dorothy Straight who acted as a conduit between Rabindranath and Gretchen Green. Green's desire to work in India was fulfilled when she received a telegram from Dorothy in June 1921 which says, “work ready in India” (Green 102). In 1921, she left America and joined Institute of Tropical Medicine in London for her formal training in nursing and midwifery. In 1922, she joined Sriniketan. Her primary responsibility was to establish a health centre in a nearby village, and create health awareness among the rural women. The poet's vision was explained to her very clearly. As she recounts, “The Poet wants someone to help with the village women. To gain the confidence of women is often to revolutionize the lives of men . . . He suggests a dispensary to start with, other duties to develop—they did, in multiple” (Green 102).

Gretchen Green undertook a number of projects in Sriniketan. The surrounding villages were infested with malaria, which posed a severe threat to the lives of the local people. Under Green's assistance Rabindranath established an Anti-Malaria Society at Sriniketan. Apart from her innovative and experimental treatments, she toiled hard to disseminate health awareness through several exhibitions, posters and magic lantern shows. In 1923, a new health centre was inaugurated at Binuria, and by 1924, twelve health societies were founded for the purpose of offering treatments as well as initiating public awareness programmes. Green's active engagement in all such ventures is documented in her memoir, where she also hints at the practical problems lying underneath such projects:

There are beginning of a dairy, a poultry farm, a tannery, a cooperative shop and weaving and dyeing departments, a dispensary is being built; and Boy Scout troops are being formed. It is up to me to run the Dispensary, and to do something for the women . . . *Subhnibas* is the name to be given to the Dispensary, Sanscrit for House of welfare. But will it ever be finished? (*The World* 113)

She utilized the Santiniketan Fair (*Poush Mela*) as a significant platform for her demonstrations. As she recounts in her memoir, “I enticed mothers into a welfare booth, washing babies free at stated intervals, presenting each angry but hygienic baby with a shirt for cold weather wear” (120). The

figure of Gretchen Green, nursing the villagers in the dispensary, and training other local village women for the similar purpose was considerably admired by the community. She herself recounts, "I have been christened *Mai*, meaning mother—this is synonymous with love and respect" (Green 146). With her gradual emergence as a mother figure to the rural community, she could successfully break through the social barriers and win their trust. Along with Snehalata Sen, she established 'Girl Guide' with fourteen girl students of Santiniketan in 1923. The purpose was to inspire the girl students to volunteer in several social services and awareness programmes in Sriniketan like the Boy Scouts. Unfortunately, this venture was short lived.

Green was instrumental in the creation of an inclusive space within Santiniketan where women received formal training in nursing and midwifery and worked under her tutelage. Within a few days after her arrival, she became a popular teacher holding classes of nursing and midwifery with local women. In her memoir, she ruminates the enthusiasm of Mrs. Nanibala Roy, "The *Dais* of the District come in for classes. Nuniwalla, a young woman of caste, character, and ability is going to Calcutta to train in the Eden Hospital as a midwife and return to nurse in the villages hereabout" (148). In early twentieth century, when Green was staying and working in Santiniketan, women's participation in the health sectors in India was very limited. Though female education was encouraged by the chief architects of the Bengal Renaissance, the debate, as to whether it is permissible for women to study science or not, continued to exist even in twentieth century Bengal. With an ambition to train women as suitable housewives who would be able to cater to the demands of the newly educated Bengali *Bhadraloks*, there were pressing demands to design a separate curriculum for women that would include religious scriptures, cooking, embroidery, house-keeping and so on. According to the orthodox thinkers of the day, women should not be encouraged to study subjects like physical science, mathematics, human anatomy, and medicine. The discourse of female education was problematic as it was largely dominated by the power politics within a patriarchal social framework.

Green's autobiographical narrative becomes a significant repository of her first-hand experiences of working with the women at Santiniketan. Her engagement with the community, detailed depiction of treatment techniques and gradual development of filial affection towards the people of Santiniketan are meticulously documented in the pages of her memoir:

Impossible to wait longer for a proper dispensary, because patients with all manner of diseases come thick and fast. I have a student to interpret and help dispense medicine: the patient brings his own bottle, we glue on strips of paper to denote a dose. Epsom salts are a joy, answering every purpose from eyewash to cleansing wounds—cow-dung poultices are my bane. Fussy patients balking at brown cinchona, I dye it red with beet juice. The Dispensary takes so much time, I have trained a student to show visitors the school. (119)

Apart from being a significant documentation of Green's days at the Poet's school in Santiniketan, *The Whole World & Company* stands as a testimonial of women's training and active engagement in health care. Green recounts an incident when a Muslim villager brings his wife to her to learn the skills of midwifery. Her happiness rests upon the fact that she could ultimately break all social barriers and infuse an enthusiasm among the women of Santiniketan and Sriniketan towards rendering service in health sector. Green also performed several secretarial jobs for the poet, often answering his letters or recording his poems. She was also nominated as the Surul Samiti member on 1929. In spite of that, a more perplexing question persists as to why she had to leave Santiniketan at a crucial hour when she became an almost indispensable among its rural community. Her memoir expresses her intense desire to go back. With a lingering sense of pain, she says, "We may have the most modern system of education, but give me again the classes beneath the trees of Santiniketan" (Green 250). It is quite surprising that the reason for her early departure from the poet's place is not recorded in *The Whole World & Company*. However, though her span of time in Santiniketan was short, her contribution in making a separate niche for the women of Santiniketan in public health sector was immense. She acted as an interlocutor between the discourse of modern medicine and the rural

community of Santiniketan by diffusing modern methods of treatment into the rural space. She took an earnest initiative to direct the first documentary on Santiniketan in the year 1923. Thus, her contribution to beautifully articulate the image of Rabindranath's *Ashram* was immense:

The poet on location behaved beautifully. We photographed him walking through paddy fields with cultivators stopping to take the dust off his shoes; as the teacher with disciples sitting at his feet; and finally as the centre of a festival scene, professors and students, villagers and visitors surrounding him. Eventually it was shot . . . The apex of excitement was the preview in a Calcutta theatre with audience of the Poet and a hundred friends. (Green 151)

Green's stay in Santiniketan was not for a considerable period of time. Yet it was interspersed with innumerable events of considerable significance. She assumed a prominent role to inspire the rural women and urged their active participation in Rabindranath's project of rural reconstruction. Her journey in India was not smooth. She had physical ailments during her stay, yet tackled every problem with rare acumen. In no time she became an indispensable part of Santiniketan community. The reason why she left so early is still unknown. However, her sudden departure did not snap her ties with Rabindranath and Santiniketan. She closely followed the poet's travels and often struggled hard to meet him. She was also a witness to Rabindranath's meeting with Einstein and Hellen Keller (Green 288). Gretchen Green was among those few people who could realize the nature and importance of Tagore's project and left indelible imprint despite her short stay at Santiniketan. Rabindranath's farewell gift to the gracious lady says everything about her:

The feel light comes and speaks to all—be glad, be free in mind,
The free breeze comes with caresses, it whispers—let there be free opening of Hearts
The Poet sings, "Take my love:
Be great, have great hopes. (Green 176)

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Mary Kom's Collaborative Autobiography: Negotiating Authorship

NATASA THOUDAM

Abstract: This paper demonstrates how Mangte Chungneijang Mary Kom's *An Autobiography: Unbreakable* is a 'mediated,' collaborative, and authorized autobiography. Writing in the context of autobiographies of American athletes, James W. Pipkin calls such an autobiography as "a kind of authorized biography rather than a true autobiography" (9). However, Duncan McDuie-Ra is critical of how Mary's 'successful' life story was co-opted within the narrative of the Indian nation-state and of how she "has come to represent a Northeast that Indians can embrace," while "figures such as dissident Irom Sharmila represent a Northeast that Indians wish to forget" (304). While this paper agrees with McDuie-Ra when he speaks of the construction of Mary into a figure of "a national hero," it is however wary of the way he discusses this construction—totally ignoring the violence, often gendered, associated with such a construction. Further, he claims that his arguments are based on how this figure of "a national hero" is constructed in her autobiography, apart from the role played by the national media. What he has ignored is the contradictions within the autobiography—the silences and fissures that indicate Mary's 'silent' refusal to be constructed thus.

This paper then interrogates the politics of collaborative writing, or more specifically mediated writing, through an examination of these silences and fissures vis-à-vis the production of Mary's autobiography while raising pertinent questions on authorship.

Keywords: Authorized autobiography, authorship in collaborative writing, India's Northeast, Manipur, Mary Kom, Kom community

Introduction

Mangte Chungneijang Mary Kom's (henceforth Mary's)¹ *An Autobiography: Unbreakable* is a typical rags-to-riches tale of how a daughter of a landless farmer becomes an internationally renowned boxer. While the title of this book itself announces the genre of its writing as "An Autobiography" as well as its author as "M.C. Mary Kom"; there is a complication when the title page shows the names of "Mary Kom with Dina Serto" written in the space assigned to an author on this page. However, in spite of these two separate written pronouncements, the copyright page still insists that: "Mary Kom asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work". The book begins with an epigraph on the subject of this autobiography (i.e., Mary) highlighting the boxer, her international achievements, and her connection with women's boxing. The book is divided into 17 chapters with a Prologue and an Afterword that trace the journey of her life from her birth in Sagang, which is described as "one of the biggest Kom villages" (Kom 3),² to the present as she resides in a government quarter in Langol Games Village in Imphal, the capital of Manipur. In addition to these sections, the Contents page also has a list of five Annexures on medals and awards she won, letters of appreciation she received, her words of appreciation for the sponsors, and her favourite Bible verses. The Acknowledgements page clearly hints at the collaborative aspect of this book as Mary goes on to thank her "dear family friend" Serto for "the efforts" and "for helping" her "write the story of" her life (155). This statement could be read along with two of her comments made in the

autobiography. The first comment appears in Chapter 2, wherein she considers “Hindi films as boring” and the reason she gives is: “We didn’t understand the language” (19). The other comment is made in Chapter 5. She writes: “The only languages I knew were Manipuri [Meiteilon] and my own Kom language. Outside Manipur, I became acutely conscious of my inability to communicate effectively in either Hindi or English” (55). These comments further suggest that Serto along with Ajitha³ may have mediated in the writing of Mary’s life as they straddle between the roles of a translator and an editor.

Consequently, two keywords constitute this paper, namely, *mediation* and *collaboration*. Both processes are involved in the telling of the story of Mary’s life. Another related term is *translation*. It is a method adopted by the translator-editors of this autobiography to assist her in the writing of her life story in English, a language she is not fluent in. The aim of this paper then is to show how her autobiography is simultaneously mediated, collaborative, and translated and how this simultaneity of three processes raises significant questions on authorship vis-à-vis, what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson would call, “women’s autobiographical practice.”⁴

With this purpose in mind, the paper first examines the role of the translator-editor as a ‘cultural mediator’⁵ who collaborates in the gendered making of what Duncan McDiue-Ra referred to as ‘a national hero’.⁶ Then, it sifts for silences and fissures to highlight instances of authorial subversions as well as to unearth their underlying gendered politics. Finally, the paper concludes with a note on authorship of a life writing informed by these processes.

Translator-Editor as Mediator-Collaborator in the Gendered Making of “a National Hero”

In the context of colonial India in *Translating India: The Cultural Politics of English*, Rita Kothari observes how “the administrative and cultural preoccupation of the East India Company in the mid-nineteenth century necessitated a more exhaustive attempt at ‘knowing the Orient’” (9). One manifestation of this process, according to her, was translation (9). Translation that Kothari is referring to here is predominantly translation into the English language. In post-independence India, she finds a link between the emergence of public sector undertakings such as “the establishment of the Sahitya Akademi (1954) and the National Book Trust (1957)” and the independent Indian nation-state’s “nation-building” process (36, 60). During the initial stages, English translation did not figure “in this scheme of ‘nation-building’” (36). However, both “the Nehruvian vision of the nation in the fifties and sixties” and “the post-liberalised India in the nineties” facilitated by the English-speaking “Indian middle class” saw the insertion of English translation in the nation-making agenda (3). This new agenda of the Indian nation-state resulted in the rise of English-language publishing market in India during the 1980s (61). A similar process is still at work in contemporary India and it is visible in the production of Mary’s autobiography. This section demonstrates how a collaborative nexus between the translator-editor, the Indian nation-state, and the publisher mediates in the gendered construction of, what Duncan McDiue-Ra has referred to as, “a national hero” produced in this autobiography.

In “‘Is India Racist?’: Murder, Migration and Mary Kom”, McDiue-Ra is critical of how Mary’s ‘successful’ life story was co-opted within the narrative of the Indian nation-state and of how she “has come to represent a Northeast that Indians can embrace,” while “figures such as dissident Irom Sharmila represent a Northeast that Indians wish to forget” (304). While his observations on the construction of Mary into a figure of “a national hero” is an acceptable fact, what is unacceptable is the way he discusses this construction—totally ignoring the violence, often gendered, associated with such a construction. The first problem is with the use of the term ‘hero’—which could be seen as an attempt to masculinize Mary. It is true that conventionally ‘boxing’ was considered a domain for men, and the entry of women such as Mary into this domain is a successful attempt to break this stereotype. Similar arguments have also been made in the context of Muslim women boxers in Kolkata by Supriya Chaudhuri and Payoshni Mitra. Both Chaudhuri and Mitra also underline the

liberatory potential of these women's preoccupation with boxing. Chaudhuri calls it "a rare freedom" accessible to a "boxer in the ring" who is concentrated "on the ends of sport" (1770), while Mitra sees this preoccupation as their attempt "to forge a new identity for themselves" as they dismantle "a stereotype by breaking into a territory that has for long belonged to men" and assert themselves as "active subjects" (1843). Still, when McDuié-Ra makes a gendered invocation of the figure of "a national hero," he is, perhaps, feeding into the same stereotype. In McDuié-Ra's vocabulary, even if the term "hero" refers to a neutral gender, this reference is problematic as the masculine form comes to represent both genders. This neutrality/invisibility of the masculine is also found in his discussion on gender vis-à-vis boxing or in the section dedicated to gender titled "Empowered Woman" or while comparing Mary with Sharmila. In fact, Mary is masculinized with qualifiers such as "a 'tiger' in the ring" and her "fit" and "athletic" body is contrasted with the "frail" and "thin" wasting body of Sharmila (318). Consequently, gender features merely at the level of description throughout his essay, while his arguments on gender difference remain essentialist.

All three scholars, similar to the Jamesonian hypothesis about "all third-world texts" as "necessarily national allegories", also attempt to show Mary's autobiographical narrative as a national allegory. In McDuié-Ra's allegory of the nation, Mary is both the self and the other vis-à-vis the Indian nation-state: "She is included in the 'us' of the Indian national imaginary, while also continuing to be cast as 'other', though an exceptional 'other', capable of illuminating a path to a more integrated nation" (319); while Chaudhuri and Mitra justify Mary's detachment from the secessionist politics of Manipur on account of her affiliation to the marginal Kom community, which similar to all minority communities in India are constantly coerced to "prove" (Mitra 1844) or "assert their loyalty to the nation" (Chaudhuri 1770). So in Mary's autobiographical writing, the narrative of her life story is found intertwined with the narrative of the Indian nation while the translator-editors act as 'cultural mediators' who assist in this weaving together of two narratives. The remaining part of this section shall demonstrate how it is done.

These two intertwined narratives begin with the Prologue. The "I" who lives in Imphal, Manipur, is not only Mary, a Kom woman from Kangathei village, but also a government officer with "a government quarter" as her "house" and hence, a subject of the Indian nation (1). This subject of the nation is narrating her journey from her "adopted village" Kangathei to Imphal even though she was born in Sagang, a Kom village. Later in Chapter 2, the relevance of Kangathei in this narrative of the nation is highlighted. Her adopted village is described in relation to its distance from another town, Moirang, which is a historically "significant" place for the Meiteis as well as "a meeting place" for the Koms (9). Furthermore, the road that leads to Kangathei is named after one of the presidents of India: Dr. Kalam Road. Kangathei is also the site of a crash of an Indian Airlines Boeing airplane. These descriptions show how Kangathei emerges as a strategic location that has a shared history for both the Koms and the Meiteis while the reference to the road and the crash site of a national airlines connects this location to the larger nation that cartographically contains both these communities. At this point, it is unclear whether it is Mary, the author, or Serto, the translator-editor, who is making these connections. Yet, on closer examination a sentence appears in this chapter that reads thus: "They speak to each other in a dialect of Manipuri known as 'Meiteilon'" (9). Meiteilon is not a dialect of Manipuri rather it is its other name. The language of the 'dominant' Meitei community of Manipur is referred to as 'Manipuri' by the Indian state and its agents. This misinformation about Meiteilon sheds some light on the contentious authorial voice of this chapter. It seems unlikely that Mary would not know this. Hence, this instance questions the authority of this autobiographical writing and puts it up for scrutiny.

Mary's mother is much disappointed on giving birth to a daughter. This unwanted daughter is then masculinised in the narrative as she is described as someone who "wanted to be a fighter like those martial arts heroes" (19), who played "against grown men" (20), and who "seldom played with the girls" (21). The authorial voice further announces that she was "never interested in the pursuits of girls", her friends were boys, she was conscious of her "boyish appearance", and "feminine clothes"

did not “look good” on her (25). It seems the narrative is suggesting that this masculinised Kom subject is now ready to enter the masculinised world of national sports because “sports always seemed like the way forward to me [her]” (26). Then, through the invocation of a sporting venue, Khuman Lampak Sports Stadium, a stadium that hosted one of the National Games in the 1990s, the nation enters the world of Mary's sporting ambition (25). In her sporting quest, her decision to choose boxing is shaped by two events: one is the first exhibition matches of women boxers in the National Games in 1999 and the other is the success of Dingko Singh, another Meitei from Manipur, in the 1998 Bangkok Asian Games (29). Apart from Dingko, her “other childhood icons were Muhammad Ali and his daughter Laila Ali” (30). Thus, an event at the ‘national’ level and two ‘national’ heroes act as inspiring agents to this would-be national subject. This is yet another attempt to bring the Indian nation together with Manipur (here synonymous with Meitei) nation and into the narrative of an individual Kom woman. Does this suggest again another instance of a lingering editorial presence here? This does not stop here. The turning point in her career that sets her “on the right path” is “a chance meeting with Rebika Chiru”, another Meitei woman boxer, who “would often walk past the house wearing a National Games tracksuit” (30). Here, Rebika embodying both the aspirations of a Meitei nation and an Indian nation together attracts a Kom woman, while boxing becomes a possible site where the conflict between the two nations could be resolved by integrating the former into the latter. Has the editorial intervention overshadow the authorial voice here? To find this out, a look into the world of boxing in Manipur is warranted. This world is Meitei dominated with Meitei boxers such as Sarita, Sandhyarani, Rebika, and Dingko and with predominantly male Meitei coaches. Moreover, in the narrative, two Meitei coaches pivotal in shaping Mary's career are described in terms of their achievements at the national level: her first coach, Oja Nipamacha is “a National Institute of Sports (NIS)-trained coach” (24) and one of her best coaches, Oja Ibomcha is “a National Boxing Champion in 1986” (30), who was given the Dronacharya Award in 2010 by the Government of India (34).

The conflict between the state-run Manipur Boxing Association (MBA) and the national Sports Authority of India (SAI) replicates the larger conflict of nations/nationalisms within Manipur. In the midst of this conflict, Mary seems to be shuttling “between them to ensure that” she keeps “both happy” (38). She highlights the reason for doing so thus: “if” she trains at SAI her “chances of getting to the Nationals are low”, while “if” she trains “only at the state coaching centre” her performance tends to go down because “SAI has better coaches and better facilities” (38). The narrative also seems to imagine a more positive outcome in case these two warring groups reconcile by joining “hands” (38). The editorial intervention seems to be slowly but steadily taking over the role of the authorial voice with such integrationist and nationalist aspirations. All this while, the Kom woman boxer remains a mere spectator to the conflict of nations/nationalisms staged in her boxing arena. Moreover, the author who asserted in Chapter 2 that “Hindi films were boring” and that “we didn't understand the language” (19) is also “happy to oblige when asked to sing, with a Manipuri song or a popular Hindi film song” (33). This contradiction is not merely an instance of an editorial interpolation but rather it indicates the hegemony of these two languages and their accompanying cultures within the boxing community represented by SAI, wherein Mary is “happy to oblige” as she wishes to gain an entry into the same community.

The story of the introduction of women's boxing in Manipur and in India shown through Kom's life writing has no female coaches as contributors. Rather it pays tribute to Meitei male coaches and male-dominated state- and national-level training centres (36–37). It is as if the marginal Kom woman boxer has no choice but to navigate her narrative through the coordinates of either Meitei male coaches and Meitei boxers or male-dominated academies.

Reading Silences and Fissures as Subversions and the Contradictions

The story of the Kom subject is not left behind in the making of this national subject. Indeed, her identity as a Kom begins with her birth in “Sagang”, which is “one of the biggest Kom villages” (3).

The translator-editors could not edit out Mary's authorial assertions wherein she expressed her appreciation for Chinese "action-packed martial art films starring Bruce Lee, Jet Li and Jackie Chan" while dismissing "Hindi films" as "boring". Mary further argues that "we didn't understand the language", that is Hindi, the national language of India (19). The pronoun used here is not "I" but "we". Here, by invoking the collective, Mary seems to be asserting her identity as a member of the Kom community; it is also an assertion that seems to have escaped the censoring eyes of the translator-editors. One significant event in Mary's life that she fondly remembers is the Annual Meet of Kom-Rem Students' Union in 1998. It is this sporting event that also marks her entry into the Kom-Rem community as she writes: "I made friends as well as quite a name for myself in the community" (23). This is yet another attempt on her part to forge her identity as a Kom woman. There is further strengthening of her bond with her Kom community as she grows as a national and later an international sporting figure in the narrative. The Kom community is consistently there to share and celebrate her victories and to support her during her moments of crisis/need such as the two incidents of theft in Bangalore and Bihar or the money collection to support her travel expenses to the Olympics. The authorial narrative resurfaces in the overwhelming presence of the national narrative imposed by the editorial voice to assert Mary's attempt to connect with her Kom community. This happens when she is touched by the sincere encouragement she received from the Kom-Rem Student Union for her first tournament outside Manipur, and she writes: "I felt then that I must win, not only for myself but also my people" (44). The Kom-Rem is now her "people". During the theft incident in Bangalore, she writes "with relief and gratitude" and wonders "at the network of the tiny Kom community" that has "managed to provide help to a young girl stranded with no support" and "so far away from home" (45). On the occasion of Mary's first international victory in 2001, the authorial voice shows the Kom community's reaction which is one of pride on her achievement and expresses Mary's desire "to assert the identity of my [her] tribe 'Kom' within my [her] own country and the world over" (53). The authorial voice is found engaging in strengthening this connection as the narrative reveals that even her husband, Onler's suitability to be her mate is attributed to the fact that they belong to the "same community" (60) and hence shared "common roots" (62).

Mary not only learnt to work at home but she also learnt to work outside in the field along with her father. Hence, in her case, there is no gendered division of labour as she obediently performs both roles equally well. However, this was before her "long-distance marriage" with Onler, who is then referred to as "Mary's husband" (69). After this marriage, there is a [gendered] role reversal where Onler does the household chores, while Mary travels to the world and goes out of the house "from camp to camp" (69). What could be inferred from this?

After this [gendered] role reversal, Mary's government job puts her in the position of a matriarch breadwinner but an upholder of patriarchal values passed on from her parents while she simultaneously sustains both her own and her parent's families. The Kom woman here joins hands with the state forces to fight the enemy of the nation-state as Manipur in her own words is described as "politically sensitive and disturbed" (28) and later as "an insurgency-torn state" (74). At this point, the nationalist translator-editors and the author seem to have converged to write a single nationalist narrative while working together in the making of an obedient god-fearing national subject.

This convergence reaches its peak in chapters 7 and 8 that are respectively on the assassination of her father-in-law by "unknown insurgents" (75) and her first pregnancy. The chapter on the assassination is titled "The other face of Manipur" and the political situation in Manipur is described as "an insurgent-torn state since 1980s" (74). The title of this chapter suggests that this is the 'other' face of Manipur. However, it is not the 'other' face but rather the actual face of Manipur that many official statist narratives are indifferent to and the single narrative formed by the merging of the authorial and the editorial voices seems complicit in maintaining this indifference. She is also critical of the parallel governments the "military groups" in Manipur run (74).

In Chapter 7, she gets a first-hand experience of the violence in Manipur with her father-in-law's assassination. This chapter is sliced into two parts by a montage of photographs depicting happy

memories from Mary's life and career. These photographs stand in stark contrast from the violent event in this chapter. Mary's 'happy' family is now threatened as Onler "wanted revenge" and did not seem to care even if the consequence is "joining the insurgency" (76). A Kom family thus becomes the battleground where the conflict of nationalisms vis-à-vis Manipur is rehearsed. There is also a possibility to insert a new coordinate into this conflict with the entry of an aspiring Kom nationalist in Onler. However, this process is halted with the news of Mary's pregnancy in the next chapter. The birth of her twins inaugurates the birth of a new nation, whereby a Kom nationalist aspiration has been contained and assimilated into the narrative of an Indian nation. The birth of this new nation also entails the formation of two national subjects in Onler and Mary at the metaphorical level and literally with the birth of the twins.

At this point an interrogation of these silences and fissures and how they underline the gendered construction of this national 'hero' is warranted here. The narrative begins with a description of her house: "My house, a government quarter in Langol Games Village,⁷ is only a couple of hours from Kangathei village"⁸ (1). She further describes this place which houses her residence thus: "There are policemen standing outside the campus. They have big guns. It's a common sight everywhere in Manipur. Both the policemen and the army men" (1). It could be inferred that, as the Superintendent of Police, she could not speak openly about state's forces' violence on the civilians. However, when she says that it is "a common sight" to have policemen and the army men "everywhere in Manipur," there is a subtle hint at the growing militarization. Reading further between the lines, the phrase "both the policemen and the army men" points to a dangerous liaison between these two groups commonly protected by AFSPA. By the time she was born in 1982, AFSPA was already imposed in Manipur. In spite of which, there is no mention of it anywhere in the autobiography. In addition, since 1982 to 2013, so many incidents of violence by the state and non-state armed forces on the civilians have been reported. Still, none of them gets even a passing reference, except of the assassination. Moreover, the splicing of the chapter on this assassination is significant. While it is 'insurgency' that has interrupted her life waking her up "to the reality of the world" around her (74), it is the pictures of her life that breaks the narrative of insurgency. I see this intervention as important. This rupture also functions as a narrative strategy to introduce a moment of suspense. When she says that "one incident woke me [her] up to the reality of the world around me [her]," it generates suspense for the readers. Immediately, after saying these lines, she talks about Manipur as "an insurgent-torn state since 1980s." Then, her father-in-law is assassinated. She calls it the waking-up moment. It appears as if she has already decided on who are her allies would be. The Annexure 4 confirms her stand as she shows the Indian army in a different light: "The immense contribution of the Army towards my academy is praiseworthy. The Army's encouragement of sports and their overwhelming support continue to inspire me. I remain thankful to them" (152).

In fact, the journalist Kishalay Bhattacharjee is critical of Mary's uninterest with Sharmila's cause. This makes him ask this question: "What makes our sportspersons so cagey about standing up against injustice when the common person can stick their neck out." Bhattacharjee's assessment of Mary is indeed limited as he fails to see the dynamics of the inter-ethnic relations in Manipur. Mary's indifference could be read amidst these relations that may not be collaborative but rather conflictual. However, having said that, I return to Chapter 16, wherein Mary talks about her encounter with the world of glamour and announces that the caption "Our Kom-mitment to the Nation" is her favourite from her photo shoot (127). This choice reflects the need on part of Mary to reiterate her loyalty to the Indian nation. When the national icon is asked to prove her commitment to the nation here, she does it by choosing an advertising caption that speaks of that national commitment. This burden is also visible in Chapter 9 titled "The comeback." In spite of the fact that "the people of the Northeast are often mocked in other parts of India" on account of their oriental looks and are called Nepalis, Chinkies, and names like ching-ching chong-chong, she insists that "whether or not" she looks "Indian," she is "Indian" and she represents India, "with pride and all my [her] heart" (91). Writing in the context of Muslim boxers in Bengal, Mitra talks about how sportspersons from minority commu-

nities in India are time and again compelled to prove their loyalty to the nation (1844–45). Agreeing with Mitra's observation, Chaudhuri⁹ also asserts that "Mary Kom is not a political activist" (1770). Chaudhuri even justifies Kom's "distancing" as "part of the way in which sport, like art, operates in society." Comparing Kom to other women activists in Manipur, Chaudhuri argues that "if other women in Manipur have used their bodies to protest the actions of the body politic, Mary Kom has chosen, through sport, to achieve measure of freedom and detachment from the political turmoil surrounding her" (1770). Thus, for Chaudhuri, "the boxer in the ring, absorbed in her discipline, needs to shut out the world, and concentrate on the ends of sport" (1770).

This pressure on the minority to prove their 'nationalism' is an evidence of the pressure of the mediated nature of Mary's autobiography as much as the silences and fissures are an interruption to this mediation. I begin by arguing that these silences and fissures disrupt the mediated nature of her authorized autobiography. It appears as if the world of sports and the world that Mary's family inhabit both are untouched by the violence in Manipur except when her father-in-law gets assassinated. I see this absence of references to the political violence against the civilians as a result of the mediatedness of the autobiography, which gets fractured through strategic invocation of violence that were mentioned at the start of this section. It is not clear whether Mary supported AFSPA or she was against it, but her own personal experiences made her condone "insurgency." Her story is the less documented story of civilians suffering violence at hands of the "insurgents." Apart from the Prologue and Chapter 7, the political situation in Manipur gets one more mention in Chapter 3 when she talks about "bandhs and blockades" as "frequent occurrences in Manipur"—Manipur, which she thinks, is "politically sensitive and disturbed" (28).

The construction of Kom as a 'national hero,' McDuié-Ra observes, entails the violent suppression of dissenting narratives be it the rejection of the 'undesirable' protest of Sharmila Irom or the refusal to link the exodus of Northeast people from major cities in India in 2012 with racism. Also, there is a line of men who need to be credited in the making of this 'national hero.' Further, media's initial reluctance to report on Mary's first international win points to the fact that it did not consider women boxing as a serious sport or a news worthy of reporting. In fact, the world of women boxing at least in India and Manipur is still dominated and controlled by men—be it the coaches, the selection committees, the sports associations, or even the Association Internationale de Boxe Amateur (International Boxing Association) (AIBA). Moreover, Onler, her husband, whom Kom claims to be very supportive of her sporting career, also had this to tell her when she discussed her plans to participate in the Olympic in 2016: "it's extremely hard to raise two young boys [now it is three] and manage a home without a wife, and so I [Kom] should consider hanging up my [her] gloves" (129). These attitudes of all these men trying to control a woman's sporting career resemble the views expressed by her first coach, *Oja*¹⁰ Ibomcha, in his reply to her when she approached him for the first time: "You are a small, frail girl. With your earrings, you don't even look like a boxer. Boxing is for young boys" (31). The irony here is that their role here is to assist women with boxing, yet they feel that it is still not a sport for women. Moreover, the influential people in Kom's life who were pivotal in 'making' her were predominantly men be it Onler, her father, her father-in-law, her coaches, the members of selection committees, and members of AIBA. All of them share credit in the 'making' of the 'national hero'—Mary Kom. In fact, all these men are trying to make a 'man' out of her so that she could excel in a sport that they considered 'masculine.'

There is also a paradox within the narrative perhaps attributable to the problematic politics of editorial mediation. In Chapter 17, she wishes to train women to fight against violent crimes against them. On the other hand, she does not extend her solidarity openly with women, such as Manorama Thangjam, who were victims of gendered violence in Manipur. Similarly, in Chapter 3, the short interlude about the bandhs in Manipur was a deliberate insertion on her part. It speaks of a violence that is so much part of the everyday life in Manipur. When she speaks of a mundane everyday incident, she cannot help but slip into and talk about the 'other' everyday—the everyday which her mediated autobiography has tried so far to avoid speaking about. However, time and again, it

surfaces sporadically even if it is for a very short while creating a space for an alternative story entailed in this individual rendition of Mary that interrupts the dominant narrative of the 'making' of a 'national hero.'

Conclusion: The Question of Authorship

The model of women's autobiographical writing that Mary has adopted to tell the story of her life owes much to decades of feminist theorisations that began in the West in the 1980s initially as an "experiential model" that "essentialized woman" (Smith and Watson, *Women*, p. 10). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson traced a genealogy of women's autobiography mapping it through a trajectory "from theories of gendered experience" through "theories of difference" to "theories of differences" in the postmodern and postcolonial contexts (4). They also highlighted the Eurocentric origin of the form of autobiography as evident in the fact that "the autobiographical 'I'" is "a sign of the Enlightenment subject, unified, rational, coherent, autonomous, free, but also white, male, [and] Western" (27). Moreover, they also observed that "theorists of postcoloniality have thus recognized autobiography as one of the cultural formations in the West implicated in and complicit with processes of colonization" (28). It is in the midst of this particular context that they brought up the issue of "collaborative texts" emerging "from the joint project of an informant lacking literacy and an interlocutor or editor interested in bringing the informant's story to a broad audience" (28). Entering this debate with Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak's "provocative question about the unspeakability of the subaltern," Smith and Watson emphasized on "the importance of oral cultural forms" and the need to "attend to the *speakerly* text, rather than remain preoccupied with the *writerly* effects of narrative" (28; emphasis in original).

One response to this Eurocentricism of autobiography is Doris Sommer's "Sacred Secrets: A Strategy for Survival," wherein she "argued [as observed by Smith and Watson again] that the *Testimonios* challenges the norms of autobiography as the narrative of an irreducibly collective subject whose acts of witnessing address the hegemony of Western individualism" (28; emphasis in original). Sommer's essay is on the autobiographical testimony of the Guatemalan leader, Rigoberta Menchu, who openly claimed at the end of her autobiography of "keeping [withholding] secret" (200). Sommer sees this act as "strategic" indicating that "her [Menchu's] testimony is 'not a personal story'" but rather "communal, grounded in collective memory and practices" (204). This results in a shift from the Western "I" to the collective "we," which is also found in what Carole Boyce Davies calls collaborative "life story production" (6). In fact, Smith and Watson saw Davies's "crossover genre" (Davies 7) as a form for empowerment of women formerly silences" (Smith and Watson xxvii). In Davies's particular case, the collaborative "Black women's texts" she discussed "contest established boundaries, offer alternative interpretations, create new public discourses, challenge hegemonic definitions of discourse" (Davies 17).

Writing in the context of caste practices in India, Sharmila Rege argues "that dalit life narratives are in fact testimonios, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance" (13). Citing Pandian, she also puts forward his argument "that dalit life narratives have violated genre boundaries by depleting the 'I'—an outcome of bourgeois individualism—and by displacing it with the collectivity of the dalit community" (Pandian qtd. in Rege 13). This led Rege to conclude that "dalit life narratives thus historically created the genre of testimonios in which the individual self seeks affirmation in a collective mode" (14). Rege then underlines the significance of the "dialectics of self and community ... in dalit women's testimonios" (14). She reasons that as dalit women are "situated as women in the community," their "*testimonios*" thus "articulate concerns of gender, challenging the singular communitarian notion of the dalit community" (14; emphasis in original).

While Laura Brueck is in agreement with Rege regarding the "collective" as a characteristic of Dalit women's life writing, the former (Brueck) is, however, critical of "simplistically categorizing

it as *testimonio*, or narrative ‘witnessing’” (26; emphasis in original). Moving away from an essentialist view of the collective experience of Dalit women, where these women are essentialized as collectivity rather than as individuals, she argues that “relationality and collectivity of experience is not accidental or necessarily organic to a woman’s view on her world” but rather this experience “is actively, politically, and consciously constructed in the course of the narrative” (26). This makes Brueck highlight the danger of “essentializing” both “men’s and women’s Dalit life narratives” (26). In fact, the critical discourse for Dalit women’s autobiography as *testimonio*, according to her, is “normative” (26). Brueck complicates the pluralistic subject of Dalit autobiographies while discussing the autobiographies of two Dalit women: Kausalya Baisantray and Susheela Thakbhaur. She reads the “subjects” in their “intergenerational stories” as “plurally constituted products of their own experience as well as those of many generations of women in their families” (34).

On the other extreme is Sarah Beth who raises pertinent question of identity linked with Dalit autobiographies. She writes of “ambivalences” in these writing on two grounds (545). First is “the authors struggle to reconcile their low-caste identity with their current urban middle-class status” (545). The other is how “their claims to represent all members of the Dalit community are challenged by Dalits of the younger generations” (545). Mary’s autobiography also shares some characteristics with Dalit autobiographies in being “collaborative” in Davies’s sense and, as demonstrated in the previous two sections, it shows the emergence of Mary as representative¹¹ of the Kom community. Moreover, there is a tracing of a trajectory wherein this Kom subject is inserted into the narrative of the Indian nation. Unlike the Bangla actress Binodini’s story whose erasure from the story of Indian nationalism underlines a betrayal (Chatterjee 154), Mary’s story is one of a forceful insertion of a recalcitrant subject into the story of many nationalisms, which are “diametrical” in Malem Ningthouja’s sense (121) or “conflicting” as observed by H. Kham Khan Suan (272). However, the point of discussion here is that of authorship that has connection with the manner in which the narrative is told or produced. The collaborative nature of some sports autobiography has been explored by James W. Pipkin. He also acknowledges the fact that “most sports autobiographies are cowritten” or “ghostwritten” (7), making him raise the question of “authorized biography” versus “true autobiography” (8). He looks at “three prominent collaborators: George Vecsey, Peter Knobler, and Roy S. Johnson” who had “cowritten autobiographies” (10). He arrives at an understanding that “while athletes may not write their books in the sense that they often lack the skills to craft them, their autobiographies are authentic because they are *their stories*” (11; emphasis in original). Separating the craft of writing from the performance of self in sports autobiographies, Pipkin compares an athlete with an actor (here Laurence Olivier). To further support this argument, Pipkin moves on to cite Kareem Abdul-Jabbar who described an “athlete’s role in the collaborative process” as “the verbal equivalent of what an actor does,” which is “performance” (12). In other words, the autobiography is a site where the subject performs him/herself and the cowriter (editor or translator) remains “a listener or reader” (12). The connection between the writer-editor/translator and the speaking/performing athlete is made by Pipkin in these lines: “The writer’s craft lies, first of all, in the ability to make the autobiography sound as if the athlete is speaking” (12). Furthermore, he also acknowledges the celebrity status of these American athletes. With the emergence of sports “as a branch of entertainment,” Pipkin observes, two trends: One is “movies stars and athletes” replacing “statesmen and business tycoons as America’s heroes and idols” in “the 1920s and 1930s” (128). The other trend is “the athlete’s celebrity statue” (128–29). However, Daniel J Boorstin, as observed by Pipkin, distinguishes a celebrity from a hero thus: “The hero is made by folklore, sacred text and history books, but ‘the celebrity is the creature of gossip, of public opinion, of magazines, newspaper, and the ephemeral images of movies and television screen’ (130). This distinction makes Pipkins to consider “the latter” (that is, “the celebrity”) as “the appropriate term for the athlete” (129).

In Mary’s autobiography too there is a celebration of a celebrity. Yet, it is a different kind of a celebrity: a celebrity who is “representative” of two marginal communities, namely, a community of

women and the Kom community. In spite of this, the autobiography's qualifications as representative is limited because this life writing refuses to undertake the political function of a "testimonio" and rather operates through silences, fissures, and contradictions. There are attempts to construct a national celebrity in Mary's case. It is here that the roles of the translator-editor and the publisher surface and align with the interest of the Indian nation-state. This begins with the cover which has a picture of the celebrity (that is, Mary) wearing a pair of gloves that have the national firm, R.K. Global, written on them, indicating the sponsor of her gloves. Furthermore, another instance to highlight this national celebrity is the 12-page montage of photographs that also shows Mary's successes/achievements as a national player. The inclusion of Mary's ramp walks with national stars, sports people, industrialists, and designers built on to this construction that ultimately reaches its completion with the phrase: "One kom-mitment to the Nation"—which not only appears on billboards showing Mary but also is her favourite photo shoot. Even the misspelling "Kom-mitment" instead of "commitment" requires attention as kom-mitment could be read as the commitment of a Kom (as Mary Kom) as well as Kom (as the Kom community) vis-à-vis the Indian nation-state. One wonders whether it is the claim of Mary Kom or Mary (a Kom) or a mediation by the editor/translator.

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Notes

¹ Popularly known as Mary Kom. In order to distinguish Kom as the subject as well as the authorial voice of this narrated life from Kom as her community, she will be subsequently referred to as Mary. Born on 24 November 1982 in Sagang village, Churachandpur district, Manipur, she was the eldest daughter of Mangte Tongpa Kom and Sanakhom Kom. She is the "queen of [the Indian] boxing [ring]" (Kom 73), and has won five World Championships and an Olympic medal in 2012. Amongst the accolades she received for her sporting feats are Padma Bhushan in 2013, Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna in 2009, Padma Shri in 2005, and Arjuna in 2003 (146).

² Subsequently, all references to the autobiography will only have page numbers.

³ In the Acknowledgements page, she is referred to as the editor (155).

⁴ See the Introduction to Smith and Watson's *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*.

⁵ A term borrowed from R. Taft, David Katan, Reine Meylaerts, Maud Gonne and Ondrej Vimr (cited in Roig-Sang and Meylaerts 9–10).

⁶ A term he used for Kom.

⁷ The venue of the XXX National Games held in Imphal in 1999. This complex was built to house the participants from rest of India.

⁸ A village in Moirang district where Kom grew up.

⁹ She was writing in the context of modern boxing and its modern and postmodern literary representations.

¹⁰ Literally, 'sir' or 'madam' (*O jaibema*): a courteous address for a teacher.

¹¹ This characteristic of being representative defers the poststructuralist pronouncement of the death of the author (Barthes) and the conceptualisation of the author function (Foucault).

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“Bepardahgi” amid Social Taboo: Radical Acts of Narration in Bilquis Jehan Khan’s Autobiography *A Song of Hyderabad* (2010)

NAZIA AKHTAR

Abstract: This essay examines the crisis of subjectivity Bilquis Jehan Khan’s autobiography *A Song of Hyderabad* (2010) both represents and creates, embedded in the act of representation/writing as well as unfolding through recollection/experience. To do so, I closely analyze two critical events in Bilquis’ life – menstruation and the consummation of her marriage – which are striking in terms of the frankness with which she describes these events and the vividness with which she informs us about her confusion and bewilderment on both occasions. Drawing from Margot Badran’s conception of autobiography as the “final unveiling,” I argue that Bilquis’ representation of these events in her life constitutes radical acts of “bepardahgi,” in defiance of the norms of the society in which she was raised, which considered intimate subjective experiences taboo, to be shrouded in silence and euphemisms. In this regard, following Sidonie Smith and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, I show that these acts of narration involve performance on the part of the autobiographer and her multiple collaborators, and it in these choices and circumstances (when, where, and how to reveal what about the self and to whom) that the central tension of Bilquis’ narration of her subjectivity lies.

Keywords: Autobiography, Hyderabad, pardah, menstruation, gendered self, gendered lives, social taboo.

Life-writing is a popular genre among Hyderabadi women who lived through the eventful decades of the mid-twentieth century.¹ One such account is Bilquis Jehan Khan’s English-language autobiography *A Song of Hyderabad: Memories of a World Gone By* (2010).² It represents a life of great contrasts, for Bilquis was raised in a charmed world of unique privilege as the granddaughter of a top courtier from princely Hyderabad. She also lived through the tumultuous transfer of power in 1948, before migrating to Pakistan. At first describing her departure from Hyderabad as the collapse of her world, the young wife and mother grows to become a prominent social presence, an enthusiastic traveller, and a published author. New domestic and social realities and major political upheavals make exacting demands on Bilquis and force her to find new or hitherto unacknowledged resources within her self and interrogate, challenge, and modify her worldview.

A Song of Hyderabad took twenty-two years to get from concept to print and was written in collaboration with other people, who helped Bilquis Jehan Khan negotiate the challenging terrain of writing a book in English that would be accessible to Bilquis’ grandchildren – to whom the book is dedicated – and who were raised in Pakistan, the USA, and the UK. Later, the desire to make this story known to a broader audience also called for the use of English. Indeed, Bilquis had never considered writing her autobiography in Urdu, her mother tongue.³ She describes the collaborative writing process in detail in her acknowledgements, as does her daughter-in-law, Karen Longeteig, in a post-script. A large part of the book was co-written with Ruby and Sherry, two young Chinese women who came over regularly to Bilquis’ house in Singapore, listened to her verbal account and

wrote it down. Following this, the manuscript languished for years, during which Bilquis' husband Nasir made a few changes to it. Almost the entire family seems to have been involved in the final stages, as Karen retyped and reviewed the manuscript while Hasan, Bilquis' son, edited it, selected photographs from a family collection, and designed the layout with advice from his own daughter and others outside the family. A niece helped to verify some aspects of the author's family history and found some of the photographs. Therefore, this account appears to have had the support of the family, with everyone participating in the production of the text at one point or another.

What has further defined and textured this account definitively is the intervention of family friend Thalassa Ali, a British writer who has published nostalgic Orientalist novels of the British Raj. Bilquis attributes to her the final form and organization of her account. To Ali are also credited "corrections" and "improvements" to the author's English, even as she is acknowledged to have "retained the sense of my phrases and language, of my way of telling a story" (Acknowledgements, n.p.). Karen Longeteig's words give the reader a clearer understanding of how influential and transformative Ali's intervention was towards defining the final shape of the book. She writes: "Thalassa's contributions were vital; she reorganized the chapters and improved the flow of the story immensely, while retaining Bilquis' voice" (283).

In her now canonical essay "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance" (1995), Sidonie Smith has persuasively argued that autobiography is essentially performance of the self, so that subjects choose what stories to tell from their lives, what modes of narration, convention, and arrangement or organization to use in this telling, and before whom to tell this self. Her theorization has been embraced by scholars who work on autobiography among South Asian women, such as Sylvia Vatuk, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, and Anshu Malhotra. Throughout the long process of writing this account for her family and eventually preparing it for publication, Bilquis too would have engaged back and forth with her multiple collaborators – also her first readers – narrating and performing her self with them in mind, "not just as an imaginary act but as an embedded feature of the production process" (Lambert-Hurley 127). However, beyond the specific examples mentioned above, concrete instances of how collaboration shaped or changed Bilquis' account are not mentioned anywhere. So, it is difficult to identify and separate the contributions of different individuals with certainty.⁴

The resultant book was published by Oxford University Press, Pakistan, and is divided into two sections. The first is titled "Hyderabad," which charts not only Bilquis' life from her birth till the day she left Hyderabad for Pakistan but also the historical, social, and cultural context of the Hyderabad world she inhabited, and which shaped her worldview in fundamental ways. By narrating her own story parallel to that of the history of princely Hyderabad and creating an "informal ethnography" of the aristocratic way of life (Lambert-Hurley 7), Bilquis gestures to her own and her family's place in Hyderabad as powerful members of the aristocracy, who relied on the patronage of the Nizam and belonged to the court. The second section – "Onwards" – is an account of her life in Pakistan and other locations as a wife, mother, social worker, and author. Of particular interest in this rich account is Bilquis' narration of her experiences of socially inscribed bodily experiences – menstruation and sexual consummation – and her contemporary response and retrospective reconstruction of these important events. It is the narrative performance of these events in Bilquis' autobiography that constitutes the primary focus of this essay.

This essay examines the crisis of subjectivity Bilquis' account both represents and creates, embedded in the act of representation/writing as well as unfolding through recollection/experience. Margot Badran has argued in her translation of Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi's memoir that the latter's act of writing about her haram life is the "final unveiling" and even her "final feminist act" (1). It is not my intention in this essay to reiterate what occasionally appears in Badran's conception to be a narrow binary equation of veiling with oppression and unveiling with emancipation.⁵ Instead, I show the possibilities of what I suggest are radical acts of "bepardahgi" in Bilquis Jehan Khan's account.

Pardah refers to a highly codified culture of modesty specific to the Indian subcontinent, which consists of the physical segregation and supervised and restricted interactions between genders. It is also a “system of ideas and actions” (Papanek and Minault vii), manifesting in the figurative veiling of aspects of women’s subjectivities. This includes, especially, women’s language and acts of self-representation or performance, such as autobiography, as Lambert-Hurley has persuasively argued in her book *Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia* (2018). Moreover, pardah and associated practices of modesty are also connected to class-consciousness and the anxiety to maintain social boundaries, as Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault pointed out many years ago. More recently, Farzaneh Milani has made this point vividly in the case of Iran, pointing out that it is not only women’s bodies but “[t]he concrete, the specific, and the personal also are veiled. Communication is veiled. Words and feelings are veiled” (xix).

Deeply felt and well-developed patriarchal anxieties about honour and shame are suffused throughout the practice of pardah. Violation of pardah is considered “bepardahgi,” i.e. immodesty or even shamelessness. In the understanding of modesty as the need to veil women’s bodies as well as their voices and other forms of articulation and expression, pardah is like practices elsewhere. It is in this regard that I mention Shaarawi’s memoir, translated and introduced by Badran. In conjunction with Badran’s positioning of Shaarawi’s memoir, I will specifically examine the representation of subjective experiences – menarche and sexual consummation – in Bilquis Jehan Khan’s account and argue that together, the mode in which this representation retrospectively occurs constitutes a radical act of “bepardahgi,” performed in dissonance with the milieu in which Bilquis was born, raised, and trained.

In many ways, *A Song of Hyderabad* is what one would expect from an upper-class Hyderabad woman. Rose-tinted memories of a feudal aristocratic past offer insights into elaborate customs and long-drawn celebrations and observances and represent Hyderabad aristocrats as kind and benevolent landlords and masters. But it also departs in significant ways from that very norm. The remarkable representation of puberty and sexual consummation, which are still considered taboo subjects in many South Asian contexts, is a case in point. As important milestones in individual lives, they are often discussed by women in accounts of their lives. However, what is specifically fascinating about this text is the frankness and openness with which Bilquis discusses these experiences, how she felt versus how she was persuaded to feel, and how others reacted around her as these events unfolded. Her recollection is marked by her recognition of how she was kept in ignorance and how bewildering both occasions were. In retrospect, she seems to have understood the reasons why her elders kept her “innocent” about her body and its possibilities and, significantly, departed from this norm in raising her own children in a different world and another time.

It is evident that her first period is still vivid in Bilquis’ mind decades after the fact and that she has had the opportunity to go over her memories and analyze them in the context in which she experienced this transformative event. She tries to be as accurate as possible. It is probable that the rich detail and analytical insights and depth she provides come not only as a result of age and time to process the experience but are also drawn out by the process of osmosis that decades of writing, narrating, correcting, editing, and discussing her life with her collaborators would have entailed. The initial audience for the book – Bilquis’ grandchildren (four granddaughters and one grandson) – for whom it was, after all, intended, would also have been in her mind as she narrated and edited her work. They were raised in both a different time as well as different socio-cultural and geographical contexts than she had been, and so would have needed the essential context she provides to help them appreciate her experience from her perspective.⁶

Bilquis writes how, on a Sunday morning at the age of twelve or thirteen, when she was “very naïve,” she discovered a red stain on her pajama and “had no idea what it was” (97). As a young girl from an aristocratic family, she was kept under strict control and surveillance by the two nursemaids assigned by her grandmother, who “never allowed me to go anywhere by myself, including the bathroom” (98). All she was told was that she had “reached womanhood,” although she had no idea

what this abstract idea meant. Ironically, the whole house understood the symbolic and socio-cultural import of this event to their time and place, and grand celebrations and ceremonies took place to mark the occasion. Bilquis was made to wear festive clothes, and her room was beautifully decorated. Her grandfather's elite Arab guards gave her a seven-gun salute. Musicians played shehnai, and hijras danced and sang at this auspicious occasion. A grand dinner was organized with entertainment by mirasans. The young girl was pampered and dressed up for the event. What is fascinating here is that the onset of menstruation is a celebrated and acknowledged event, an occasion for great public rejoicing, while the subject herself is kept utterly ignorant about this crucial bodily change and what it means for her.

How this cycle of ignorance would then be perpetuated in highly codified, conservative, and patriarchal cultures can be seen in the fact that Bilquis, in turn, was not allowed to tell her younger, curious cousins about the reason for this grand celebration in her honour. "The subject remained taboo to the uninitiated" (99), she informs us, by a society that believed in keeping girls "innocent" until married. And even to the initiated, only information deemed necessary (to the preservation of honour) was given, such as the fact that she would menstruate every month and that she could not go anywhere without her grandmother's permission. Specifically, visits to the courts of the Nizam and his sons were now forbidden, no doubt for fear of the possibility of sexual attention and pregnancy out of wedlock, which would be a scandal that she would never be able to live down. This is where the information stopped, and Bilquis notes that she was upset because she had not been told and could not see the connection between her periods and going out and meeting people.

An older Bilquis is at pains to rationalize these actions, informing us that

I only realized much later that my grandparents were trying to protect me from dangers, real or those of gossip. Society was protective towards women, [*sic*] while the real dangers may not have been great, the damage resulting from a bad or 'fast', promiscuous, reputation could ruin the rest of a girl's life. (100)

She adds further that her grandparents had to be especially strict with her because she was popular in school and actively participated in school events, because of which people knew her and were sending proposals of marriage for her (100). It is striking that a teenage girl having a public presence, or her name being known and occupying people's thoughts and attention was seen as something with potential for danger or threat to her reputation and, therefore, entire survival. The concept of *pardah* as demanding the silence and invisibility of women's subjectivity is useful here to understand how fragile the constructs of "honour" and "shame" are and how the anxiety associated with the need to constantly maintain them hinders the lives and possibilities of women.

In hindsight, Bilquis writes that she understands the wisdom behind the traditional remedies and practices that she was made to follow during her first period: it was believed that menstruating girls needed these. She even recommends them for other young girls when they have their first period (99). Furthermore, she notes that there were privileges that were associated with reaching puberty, and this included being involved in "family decisions" (102), such as viewing and selecting brides for male relatives and representing their qualities to the prospective grooms. However, it is significant that these privileges too came with restrictions for single girls and women, for it was only when she was married that she was properly included in the circle of women across generations who gathered to gossip about the sordid tales of unhappy couples and sexually unfulfilled women at court. Bilquis mentions how "[i]t was definitely not the done thing in Hyderabad to discuss court life in the presence of young people – especially young girls. Because of this, as a child living with my grandmother, I knew nothing of what went on" (77). She tries to demystify this enforced ignorance about sex in some way, in the process attempting to make sense of her life for herself and for the audiences for whom this book is meant. She also hastens to dignify her grandmother's intentions in narrating these scandalous tales, for we are informed that "Amma Jan's intention in relating these incidents was, I am sure, both cautionary and uplifting. She meant me to learn lessons from the lives she described" (84).

Bilquis would go on to marry at seventeen her young tutor, who had confessed to being in love with her and to whom she too was attracted. But just as she had no knowledge about her period, she had no say and no information about her wedding. Nobody told her why she had to get married immediately after school one fine day, and it was only later that she realized that it was because of Nasir's professional commitments that this was necessary (108). During this hasty wedding, Bilquis experiences many firsts that amount to self-discovery, such as wearing makeup, about which she writes that she was "surprised to see how different I looked" (110). But the most momentous experience was learning who her true biological parents were, and that she had, in fact, been adopted by the grandparents she had always been told were her parents. Furthermore, even at this critical juncture, no one thinks to inform her directly, and it is when the nikah contract is being read out and her parents are mentioned in the mandatory clause that identifies her as their daughter that she realizes who they are. However, the fact that the family had never bothered to explain this point to her suggests not that it was some sort of taboo but that it was only seen as a technicality in a large, tight-knit family and society where children were often raised by other-mothers.⁷

Other new experiences and challenges – that Bilquis is yet again expected to take into her stride – include her in-laws' considerably different lifestyle from that of her own family. Throughout the wedding, Bilquis' Scottish mother-in-law Margaret insists on western practices that are seen by Bilquis' Hyderabad family as violating the norms of seamliness and even *pardah*. From insisting that the bride and groom should sit together and that her son would put a ring on Bilquis' finger to asking that the bride be allowed to visit the groom's family before her *rukhsati* or departure from her natal world, Margaret demonstrates the different culture she comes from and the contrasting norms of Nasir's Scottish-Hyderabad family. These were unusual things in Hyderabad and would have certainly felt strange and shocking to Bilquis as well. Having been raised in a *pardah* environment, now she had to both adapt to life outside *pardah* – which was becoming more and more common – and navigate the conventions of a culture totally at variance with her own. Her husband's and in-laws' liberal views and ideas about many things would have been unexpected and even, it is suggested, disorienting, but she is expected to accept these and has no say in them.⁸

In line with a practice that was quite common when brides were very young and/or their husbands had yet to "settle down" in their careers, Bilquis married Nasir but did not leave her family home immediately to live with her husband. In this intervening period between *nikah* and *rukhsati*, interactions between a wife and a husband are strictly monitored to prevent any sexual contact that could besmirch the name of the bride and her family. However, yet again Nasir's family has a different outlook, and Margaret's request that Bilquis should visit them every week and meet Nasir under his parents' supervision is received with consternation by Bilquis' grandmother. But she is made to give in, as a result of which Bilquis has experiences that are unprecedented for someone like her and has to learn to deal with them. On one such occasion, on a picnic, Nasir asks his mother's permission – ironically! – to kiss Bilquis. Veiling her modesty even in her recollections, she tells us only that she felt very embarrassed when he kissed her (112).⁹

She writes more openly about the consummation of her marriage to Nasir. After the festivities and rituals marking her arrival in her husband's home are over, Bilquis finds herself in the bridal room, which was beautifully decorated by Margaret and contained all kinds of conveniences that she had never seen before, leading her to remark that "[t]he whole room appeared to me like a fairyland. I had never seen the like of it" (114). But the joy and wonder were short-lived, and she writes that she was frightened at the thought of being alone with Nasir (114). Seeing her confusion and fright, Nasir provides some clarity by "very gently explain[ing] to me that I was now his legally wedded wife and no one would object to my being alone with him" (114). He is understanding and patient with her and tries to draw her out of her inhibitions and encourages her to relax because it had been a long day. To ensure that she is comfortable, he suggests that she wear his sleeping suit because her own clothes had not yet arrived from her natal home. She recalls how he asked her to admire him dressed

as a bridegroom because she had been sitting with her head lowered and eyes shut in the bridal attitude expected of her in Hyderabad culture. She also confides to the reader that Nasir gave her a ring of pink topaz and pearls that night (114–5).

In line with traditional Hyderabad culture, where sex and consummation have social and political significance for family, society, and community, overriding modern notions of privacy for the newly wedded couple, Bilquis' grandmother had sent a maid to sit outside the bridal suite and report back to her about whether the marriage was consummated or not. But her mother-in-law gives the maid food and bedding and locks her up inside the music room! (115) It is well, perhaps, that the poor maid was locked up, for she may have found the proceedings of that night and the following day disturbing. Bilquis writes:

The first night I was in a daze. I could not comprehend what was happening and I just passed out. The next morning when I woke up, my head was on my father-in-law's lap and the bed sheet was stained. My mother-in-law changed the bed sheet and washed it herself, so that nobody came to know anything that morning. The only thing I remember is that I was in great pain, and my mother-in-law helped me to wash and dress, and then took me out onto the verandah for breakfast. (115)

In this narration of the touching compassion and discretion of her caring in-laws, Nasir is notably absent. Bilquis studiously avoids mentioning him. This silence is not beyond comprehension. Despite this unpleasant start, Bilquis and Nasir go on to enjoy a long, fulfilling, and happy marriage. It is probably this sense of loyalty and attendant propriety that is involved in her careful and conspicuous skirting of any mention of her husband. As Sylvia Vatuk has noted in her remarkable, long-term work on the memoir of Zakira Ghouse:

Every writer of an autobiographical work has to consider the possibility that family members or others may react badly to what she has written about herself, about them, or about events at which they were present and may remember differently from the way she has represented them. This is a particular concern for one who intends to *publish* her life story. But it is a consideration too for an author who is writing only for her own close relatives—as in this case—or even for her eyes alone, since she cannot ensure that others may not later discover its existence and be distressed by its contents. Therefore, most autobiographers find themselves either indulging in a certain amount of self-censorship or simply deciding to let the chips fall where they may, knowing that some of their most intimate relationships may be ruptured as a result. (Vatuk, “A Passion for Reading,” 36)

In Bilquis' account, her loved ones have either been shown in an especially tender light or been conscientiously excluded to circumvent the scrutiny of her multiple audiences, while centring on her own experience and memory of this event. The narration reconstructs this consummation as if it is about her and her alone, allowing us to mull over an experience that was almost always shrouded in the silences of a conservative society predicated on constructing women as either virgins or mothers, in both cases miraculously untouched by sex.

In this regard, it is vital to not only pay attention to whom Bilquis includes and excludes in her reconstruction but also to unpack the incident of her fainting. It is not clear whether this moment in the text describes a physical loss of consciousness that appears to have lasted most of the night or is a conceit meant to figuratively veil the explicit details of Bilquis' sexual experience. Are we not told because the author did not want us to know? Side-stepping the precise details, Bilquis chooses to focus instead on the strangeness, newness, and/or fright of this experience, informing us that she was “in a daze” and “could not comprehend what was happening.” It is suggested by this phrasing that her recollections are dominated by this aspect of her experience, which she could not process at the time without the vocabulary or perspective to do so.

As if justifying the disturbing experience that follows and attempting to orient an alien reader to the time and place in which it occurred, Bilquis explains beforehand how she knew nothing about sex because it was considered “indelicate” (114) to discuss such things with girls.¹⁰ She uses euphemistic language, such as “facts of life” and “such things” (114), to discuss sex, although her tone is matter-

of-fact and not demure. She also does not describe the sexual experience itself, as pointed out above. In fact, I argue that that is part of Bilquis' first sexual experience, i.e. it was indescribable. It was not something that she could comprehend, process, or explain at the time with her state of knowledge about sex or the body. But it was clearly something that stayed with her and which she thought was important enough to record in this way and pass down to her grandchildren – most of whom are young women – to perhaps show them the state of knowledge about sex and the body among sheltered young women of her generation and/or simply share with young women of another time what it meant to be a young woman at her time. An older, worldly-wise Bilquis was able to gauge how different that conservative world and time in Hyderabad was, compared to later life in Pakistan and, indeed, the other parts of the world to which she travelled and lived.

Despite the use of euphemisms, conceits, and deliberate omissions, Bilquis' narration of the consummation of her marriage is radical. It violates the taboo associated with sex and discussions of sex among the privileged upper- and middle-classes of both Hyderabad and Muslim societies. Unlike the elders among whom she is raised, Bilquis does not find it worth concealing her experiences of menstruation and sex from her grandchildren or even the public audience to whom she ultimately told her story. Furthermore, while there is a coy hint towards the construct of virginity in the detail that the bedsheet was stained, the "proof" of her virginity and, therefore, "honour" is not the focus of the scene. What the reader takes away from her experience is not that the marriage was consummated or that the bride bled as she was expected to, but the pain and bewilderment of Bilquis' experience. The same is true of the experience of her first period, which leaves the reader with the overall impression of the state of confusion and ignorance in which she was – to her dissatisfaction – kept by her elders.

By narrating in this manner events that are usually meant to be kept under wraps by respectable women, an older, more confident and independent Bilquis demystifies them and violates the very norms of the *pardah* institution in which she had been raised. It is in this sense that, I argue, she performs acts of "bepardahgi," a word that is traditionally used to monitor and condemn violations of *pardah* norms. I reclaim it here to turn it on its head and denote the narrative and performative defiance of patriarchy by Bilquis Jehan Khan. Taboos not ever to be mentioned in any direct detail or denotation before men, to be discussed only among women – particular women – in whispers and gendered euphemisms are now shattered not only before her collaborators and her grandchildren but a public audience no less. In doing so, despite the restrictions and conventions in which she was schooled, Bilquis finds ways to convey a sense of her self. As Lambert Hurley has said, performance of the self is "to be negotiated, defined, and destabilized by primarily female authors moving beyond the 'crevices' formed by nationalist and reformist agendas to craft their own subjectivity" (*Elusive Lives* 19). Departing from the norm of the world in which she was brought up, Bilquis highlights a common theme in both the experiences I have studied above: the ignorance, confusion, and bewilderment of young women kept largely unaware of their bodies – which are inscribed with symbolic social and communal significance – take centre-stage in her narration.

Moreover, these are not the only instances in Bilquis' account where she illustrates how the Hyderabad in which she was raised (and whose existence and passing her book is meant to document) does not determine her, a modern Pakistani woman and, indeed, a cosmopolitan citizen of the world. This is a distinctly gendered account, which focuses on what it meant to be a woman in a world that places special restraints upon anyone gendered thus. Bilquis writes with sympathy, for example, about those of her Mahbubia schoolmates who were caught meeting their boyfriends and expelled. She writes that they did not do anything morally wrong and uses their example to show how strict the school was and how the girls were watched continuously (69–70). Her shift from princely Hyderabad to the new world she must learn to adapt to after migrating to Pakistan is visible too in the way she brings up her children without submitting obediently to the ideas and milieu she was raised in and transferring them on to them. She subverts and unlearns that world in many ways.

She describes how she wanted to bring up her children “in a more modern way than the one used when I was a child” (191), giving them more agency, freedom, and opportunities. She informs them that “a mother is a child’s best friend” (193). She also notes how her daughter and her friends acquired poise and confidence because of their lessons in Bharatanatyam, and remarks: “[w]hen I was a child we would never have dreamed of dancing in public!” (193) This new, bolder form of parenting included allowing mixed gatherings under supervision and pushing her children to go out and see how the less privileged live and negotiate life (211) to understand that “there was no difference between human beings: it was a matter of opportunity and environment” (211). Probably, she knew and understood that her children – especially her daughter Nayyar – were growing up in a very different world from hers. She wanted Nayyar’s path in life to be easier than her own negotiations had been after she entered the world as a married woman.

This is not to say that Bilquis breaks rank completely. As mentioned above, she protects people she loves and avoids showing them in a negative light. Moreover, despite her finding ways to construct her subjectivity on her own terms, she does adhere to the norms of her culture and society. For instance, for all the sympathy she expresses for her Mahbubia schoolmates, she discusses the question of boys with a teenage Nayyar, explaining to her that “if one saw a beautiful rose, one would admire it, but if everyone wanted to snatch it, the petals would break” (212). She warns Nayyar not to be taken in by the “boys’ sweet talk” (212). She also prevents her from roaming around alone and becoming the subject of neighbourhood gossip in Karachi. Finally, Bilquis stresses to Karen – her future American daughter-in-law – that her wedding to Hasan should be according to Islamic law and that it was important to her that any children from this marriage would be raised as Muslims (244–5).

This is also part of the gendering of this account, and Bilquis is constantly mindful of the limits and restraints that go into making good, morally upright, respectable Muslim women. Even as she shatters integral taboos of the society and culture to which she belonged, at no point does she depart from these essentials. Bilquis Jehan Khan had belonged to the upper echelons of political and social power in princely Hyderabad. Her account, however, is part of a larger project among upper-class autobiographers to dismantle a reputation of decadence and excess to claim sharif notions of propriety and consign the glittering aristocratic past to a realm of nostalgia and romance (Lambert-Hurley 94; cf. Pernau 39). Rebuilding her life in Pakistan after Partition, Bilquis relied on decidedly middle-class codes of sharafat to root deeply both her social standing as well as her own sense of belonging.¹¹ Lambert-Hurley has stressed the importance of geography in the construction of autobiography. In this regard, we must be conscious of the turns, as Bilquis writes, her life had taken (xv), through princely Hyderabad, post-Partition Pakistan, the UK, the USA, Singapore, Kuwait, Malaysia, and the other places she and her intended audiences and collaborators have lived in and belong to.

The impact of Bilquis Jehan Khan’s formative and immersive early years in the princely Hyderabad milieu can be seen in her total dependence on the social capital that she relied on as a privileged part of that world, so that she declares that she felt as if her world had collapsed when she was told that Nasir wanted to move to Pakistan after 1948. This period was one of deep personal crisis, as Bilquis is separated from her entire support network to embark on a new life away from everyone she loves. Significantly, it was the transfer of power in Hyderabad in 1948 and the shifts it marked in both culture and locus of power that compelled the young couple to move away from Hyderabad in the first place. It is tempting to superimpose Bilquis’ narration of the self onto the narration of the nation or that moment of critical rupture that violently inaugurated new beginnings, configurations, and alignments for both the political and the personal. The demands made on the young woman to set up a new life in a new country led to her discovering new aspects of her self, hitherto unplumbed resources that enabled her to turn from the world to which she was accustomed, to face the challenge of the world that was before her.

Discussing the work of feminist Hindi writer Archana Verma (1946–2019), Nivedita Menon points out that women’s autobiographies have finally brought into the light the things that they have

only discussed in the privacy of their homes and courtyards, “utter[ing] the names of their intimate body parts and their bodily flows,” in defiance of patriarchy, being faithless to patriarchy and, instead, faithful to “their sense of self” (135). This insight is valuable here because Bilquis Jehan Khan’s autobiographical narration takes two events that have long been the subject of social and communal significance but have only been discussed in these terms. These discussions have never centred on the woman as an individual and her subjective experience in this context. The crisis of subjectivity in her account is precisely this, that it oscillates between her nostalgic narration of “a world gone by” and her moving “onwards,” her ambivalence and critical break from that very world to unveil expression on subjects hitherto treated as taboos. Autobiography is particularly well suited to the narration of such intimate experiences, and her sense of belonging and assertions of identity through different categories of gender, religion, nationality, region seem not to have “undermine[d] a sense of self so much as frame[d] ... [her] multiple and varied expressions of interiority” (Lambert-Hurley 24–5). It is in this context that Bilquis Jehan Khan’s performance of subjectivity – her radical acts of “bepardahgi” – should be read.

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Notes

¹ Other prominent texts in this genre written in Hyderabad include *Bikhri Yaadein* (Scattered Memories; 2008), the remarkable Urdu-language autobiography of Jamalunnisa Baji (1912–2009), and the non-fiction essays (khaake and tanz-o-mizah) of Fatima Alam Ali (1923–2020) in *Yaadash Bakhaer* (May God Preserve Them; 1989). It also extends to English-language novels – thinly disguised autobiographies (Lambert-Hurley 40) – such as Zeenuth Futehally’s *Zohra* (1951) and Huma R. Kidwai’s *The Hussaini Alam House* (2012); culinary memoirs, such as Doreen Hassan’s *Saffron and Pearls* (2018); and auto/biographies, such as Bilkees Latif’s *The Fragrance of Forgotten Years* (2009). Siobhan Lambert-Hurley has pointed out how certain geopolitical formations – such as princely states – offered particularly fertile ground for life-writing by Muslim women (22). Indeed, Bilquis’ account must be seen as part of a tradition of women’s life-writing in Urdu and English – Muslim or non-Muslim – from this milieu, although this is beyond the scope of the present essay.

² I choose the term autobiography in agreement with a call by Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (2015) to reclaim it from the masculine western canon, with whose expressions of sovereign, singular consciousness it has long been exclusively associated. Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley expand the capacity of this term to include texts and contexts that were previously excluded and othered, deploying this more robust, inclusive redefinition to refer “to a diversity of forms, subjects, and expressions from the Mughal period to the regional courts of the eighteenth century, from the high colonial period into Independence” (7). Their formulation is in line with the ways in which women practitioners have negotiated, stretched, and ruptured the standard boundaries of the genre.

³ Hasanuddin Khan and Karen Longeteig, in conversation with author, 31 July 2021.

⁴ Fleeting hints of different registers of English, for example, are arguably suggestive of the many hands through which the text has passed. One aspect of rewritings and revisions by multiple editors is that the account has a “finished,” “polished,” and “complete” texture to it, although fragmentation is also seen, particularly in the second part of the account. Editing by different people, some quite distant from the milieu and modes of signification in the subcontinent, shows in some other interesting ways. Given that there is a detailed glossary, Urdu and Persian words and phrases have been unevenly translated in the body of the text, but when they are, the interventions of Bilquis’ Anglophone collaborators create strange incongruities. “Takhallus,” for example, has been translated as “nom de plume” (159), which is alien and fails to capture the

technical role of this word and concept in poetry. The specificity of the word is lost and confused with the introduction of a concept from a third culture, i.e. French or Francophone.

⁵ Nor is it my intention to smooth over the vast diversities of practices in veiling and seclusion across Muslim cultures and communities located all over the world.

⁶ This is certainly visible, for example, in the interpretations she provides for intricate aspects of *pardah* practice. The same goes for colonial concepts, such as “bed-tea” (31), which would now be new to younger generations of South Asians as well as their west-based diasporic relations. This would apply too to the larger audience of Bilquis’ account, both her collaborators and the public readerships for whom this book was finally published.

⁷ I borrow the concept of “other-mothering” from the way it is used in black communities in the USA, i.e. to refer to the shared care of children by many women within an extended family or community, because it resonates with the way children were and are often raised in the Indian subcontinent. See Wane (2000); Collins (1994); Jenkins (1998); and hooks (2008) for more. Yet, despite the unique devotion of her grandparents, there is a sense of injury on Bilquis’ part and an appreciation of what a momentous truth had been kept from her all these years. She writes of her uncles: “I grew up among those boys entirely unaware that I was not their sister. None of them told me the truth. The whole family kept a conspiracy of silence” (21). While these were common and widely accepted practices, history is strewn with examples of such arrangements that were traumatic to the mothers and possibly also the children. A fictional representation of this difficult predicament can be seen in Futehally’s novel *Zohra*, where the protagonist has to deal with the traumatic possibility that she may have to give her son to her sister-in-law, who has no children of her own.

⁸ This would go on to include her first pregnancy, which is practically supervised by her mother-in-law, who decides that Bilquis will not stay with her natal family during her pregnancy and childbirth (as per Hyderabad custom) but will remain with her husband and his family and be cared for by Margaret herself as well as a team of doctors. When the baby is born, he is looked after by Margaret, so that Bilquis writes: “I sometimes did not even feel I had become a mother” (129). Her father-in-law played a role in educating her along western lines, tapping her hands with a long stick across the dining table when she made mistakes with the unfamiliar cutlery she now had to learn to use, and so she began to pretend she was not hungry and ate less (127). However, Bilquis becomes very close to her loving in-laws and is grateful for the support they provide, which enables her to do other things, such as travel or undertake social work. She emphatically informs us that she loved them and that they cared for her as if she were their own child. In fact, she writes that her mother-in-law was her best friend (117), “my guide and mentor” (253), and that her father-in-law “became a real friend” to her (127) and made her feel that he was proud of her (128).

⁹ These picnics in places that were outside Hyderabad city proper constituted an unprecedented mode of interaction with the outdoors for an upper-class girl like Bilquis and would have been decidedly democratic and transgressive, owing to the possibility of rubbing shoulders with people from different genders and walks of life (112). When her *rukhsati* finally takes place, and she goes to live with her husband, Bilquis’ exposure to a new way of life also includes enjoying the new kind of food her mother-in-law prepares and finding the sight of modern western furniture strange. She is also made to learn how to speak in English – which was the medium of communication in her new home – as well as adopt the social manners of privileged British society.

¹⁰ Throughout this account, the narrator dwells on how “innocent” and uninformed upper-class Hyderabad girls were about things such as flirting, courtship, and sex. She remembers, for example, how her grandmother disapproved of letting her stay with her grandfather at the residence of Prince Azam Jah, for fear that the little girl would see the parties with dancing girls and alcohol (8). Similarly, we are told that her grandmother herself did not know anything about the dancing girls that her thirty-five-year-old husband was accustomed to spending his time with when she had just married him as a young girl of fourteen. We are told that “[s]he had no idea about ‘life’ then, and didn’t understand what was happening around her” (18).

¹¹ Middle-class constructions of *sharafat* or respectability, which Lambert-Hurley suggests are harnessed by Bilquis and other upper-class autobiographers, emphasized “achievement against birth, husbanding of resources against demonstrative consumption, the emphasis placed on the importance of education, and the turning towards reformist Islam with its accent on the scriptural sources against charismatic legitimation and popular syncretistic forms, on the value of personal piety against salvation through mediation and intercession” (Pernau 39). On a related note, for all that it is written in English, even the structure of Bilquis’ autobiography places it firmly within the milieu of the Islamic Indo-Persian tradition of biography, which has a strong sense of history and is characterized by an extended and intricate engagement with lineage “in order that the subject’s life may be given meaning within the context of his or her relationships to family and

teachers" (Lambert-Hurley *Elusive Lives* 116; Metcalf 127-8; see also Hermansen and Lawrence's striking analysis of characteristics of the tazkira tradition of biography). Like other texts in this tradition, Bilquis' account also demonstrates a topical or episodic arrangement and an emphasis on offering practical lessons for living a moral and righteous life.

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Privileging Non-Conformity as Self-Articulation: A Reading of Dilara Hashem's *Kaktaliyo*

SHUBHRA RAY

Abstract: This paper will read Dilara Hashem's *Kaktaliyo* (Coincidences), to explore the unique trajectory that her self-expression takes, and the negotiations with individualism and representativeness that this entails, given the hegemonic discursive presuppositions which exist about her identity as a Bengali Muslim. The representation of South Asian Muslim women in the diaspora, has been marked by certain predetermined themes related to Islamic religious practices and veiling. Hashem, despite her diasporic location, and through the delineation of a childhood – which she has called fairly representative of her class – refuses to be appropriated by such discourses. The author has an independent voice – that is neither one of a victim nor of a reactionary – and this stands her in good stead in both critiquing gender oppression and espousing her identity as a Bengali Muslim. *Kaktaliyo*, then becomes a critique of the untenable idea of a monolithic perspective on Islam through the depiction of a life steeped in rationality, itinerancy and non-conformity, where religion is only one component of one's identity.

Keywords: Autobiography, shared syncretic culture of undivided Bengal, religious tolerance, itinerancy, memory

Dilara Hashem had called *Kaktaliyo* (Coincidences), an autobiographical novel, at the time of its publication in 1985, but later acknowledged it to be her autobiography when it was reprinted by the University Press Limited of Dhaka in 1999. While there is little or no difference between an autobiography and an autobiographical novel from a generic perspective (Lejeune 8), the prevalence of life-writing by women which focuses on childhood or privileges the social over the individual, makes this distinction a critical one as it lays bare the awareness of the limits of acceptability. Hashem, for instance, had wanted to keep herself under a shroud of "secrecy" despite writing about a non-contentious period of her life – her childhood (Hashem vii). Even in personal narratives, expected to be reflective upon "matriliney within the social structure of patriliney", (Gulati and Bagchi 10) one notices this concentration on the early years and a taboo about writing on sexuality, so much so that Maitreyee Chattopadhyay, writing about Bengali women's autobiographies in general, rued the lack of focus on intimacy and criticized the practice of "looking back at life from a comfortable distance – so that society and the world can call one a 'good girl'".¹

Whether it was the perceived politics of reception that determined Hashem's choice of the period for her autobiography is not clear, but she has spoken of the restricted space for self-articulation available to women in the male-dominated Bangladeshi literary establishment.² It needs to be noted here that following postmodern interventions in the understanding of selfhood, the subject no longer has a "unified core, hides no secret, discoverable true essence. In process, a site of dialogue with the world, others, memory, experience, and the unconscious, the subject is implicated in sinuous webs of intersubjectivity" (Smith 15). And yet, in deconstructing the subject thus, the aim was "to release the term into a future of multiple significations" and to "give it play as a site where unanticipated

meanings might come to bear" (Butler 15). In the case of women, however, only through releasing the "category" of women from a fixed referent that something like "agency" could become possible:

For if the term permits of a resignification, if the referent is not fixed, then possibilities for new configurations of the term become possible. In a sense, what women signify has been taken long for granted for too long, and what has been fixed as the 'referent' of the term has been "fixed," normalized, immobilized, paralyzed in positions of subordination. In effect, the signified has been conflated with the referent, whereby a set of meanings have been taken to inhere in the real nature of women themselves. To recast the referent as the signified, and to authorize or safeguard the category of women as a site of possible resignifications is to expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman [...]. (Butler 15-16)

In the absence of such reconfigurations, the question of what it means to be a woman in specific political and social systems, and how pushing those boundaries could lead to (mis) appropriation and "othering" in political discourses³ becomes evident from cases of self-censorship like Hashem's, as well as the acerbic reception of autobiographies that do not fit into the mould.⁴

At one level, *Kaktaliyo* is the story of Hashem's childhood corresponding to the first eight years of her life – but the preface and intermittent authorial interventions, allow for a more nuanced reading of the text, which is structured as a chronological linear narrative punctuated by critical interventions. The author has an independent voice: neither that of a victim nor of a reactionary, and this stands her in good stead in both critiquing gender oppression and espousing her identity as a Bengali Muslim. The representation of South Asian Muslim women in the diaspora, has been marked by "persistent and deterministic themes and structures such as religion, 'arranged marriages' and the hijab and veiling" (Ahmad 45). Hashem, despite her diasporic location, and through the delineation of a childhood – which she has called fairly representative of her class – refuses to be appropriated by such "pathologized, victim-focused discourses" (Ahmad 54). *Kaktaliyo*, then becomes a critique of the untenable idea of a monolithic perspective on Islam through the depiction of a life steeped in rationality, itinerancy, and non-conformity, where religion is only one component of one's identity. In this paper, keeping in mind the theoretical perspectives discussed, I would like to read Dilara Hashem's *Kaktaliyo* to explore the unique trajectory that her self-expression takes, and the negotiations with individualism and representativeness that this entails.

Kaktaliyo focuses on the period from 1936 to 1944, and through the narrator Razia Rashid – Raju – Hashem writes about the defining experiences of her formative years. In this context, it would be interesting to note that the period in which she bases her writing – she is talking of British India and East Pakistan even while referring to the nation-state as Bangladesh. The idea of this nation gets carried over unproblematically across the tumultuous double reconfigurations of identity that it goes through – first as East Pakistan in 1947 and then as Bangladesh in 1971. In an interview given in 2011 she acknowledges the fact that politically there was no "Bangladesh" then, but in the book the reference is unproblematically to it.⁵

In undivided Bengal, her father was employed in the civil services during the British occupation of India and post 1947, worked in Pakistan's Jute Regulation. Hashem calls her family an ordinary one – similar to most families in Bangladesh. Her father was in a transferable job – was initially the sub-deputy magistrate and later on became the deputy magistrate in the British civil services. He was hardworking, interested in educating his children and conservative – like most middle-class fathers in Bangladesh. Her mother was of a loving nature, but under the pressures of running the household, could often be short-tempered. She took care of their eight children – what Hashem calls an *average* family – tried to save money, and would constantly worry about their future. However, they both had certain qualities that made them stand out from the crowd – straightforwardness, idealism, self-respect and stubbornness – which they passed on to their children in varying degrees.

Claims of commonality and representativeness – which mark the descriptions of the various characters, including herself – is Hashem's way of underlining her desire to remain inconspicuous even while

proclaiming her individuality: this is done by turning those very yardsticks on their head, by which an unflattering picture had been painted, in the first place. The tone for this as well as the oscillation between her childhood self and her adult persona which forms the text of *Kaktaliyo*, had been decided in the preface itself: also, while in the text, she consciously allows her adult voice to become muted, or at least take a back seat and privileges her childhood persona, here she gives it a free rein.

In the preface, she had begun by calling herself a donkey, the difficulty of which becomes even more amplified for Hashem, because of her gender. It, of course, is a way of paying herself an underhanded compliment, where lack of awareness or acceptance of social mores becomes a way of vindicating her stance, rather than being defined by them. Noting the silence of Bangladeshi women regarding the discrimination that comes their way, she emphasizes her uniqueness in speaking of the slights that have happened to her: this is attributed to the similarity that she has with a donkey. The preface is written as a monologue addressed to male readers and is an exposé of the male-dominated Bangladeshi literary establishment – where *good-looking* women writers like her – “akin to the bitter taste of whiskey” (xi) – were welcome as long as they could be patronized or exploited; the moment they started finding ground beneath their feet, separate yardsticks were invented to keep them apart, to judge them only in the context of other women writers.

It needs to be noted here that in the autobiographical narrative per se, Hashem does not speak of personal slights – in fact, she takes great pains to avoid being viewed as a victim. But in the preface, she does not spare anyone from her scathing censure. Hashem states that it is her obstinacy that led her to write her story the way she did. She had earlier mocked the male writers for using sexuality to sell their books, in the context of which her “raking mud” – the slights that she describes – would be disappointing (xiii); and now she criticises the Bangladeshi literary scene for its emphasis on surrealism. She believes that it is nothing more than a ploy to deceive the masses – this attempt “to quote Camus, Sartre and Brecht” in order to mask one’s reality (xv). She wants to speak of her *true* story, unlike the others. As she puts it,

[...] for everybody is not a stupid donkey like me, they know that if they clear up the mist around them and appear in a straightforward manner, that their real character will be revealed, which is why they use the surrealistic make-up to enter the literary arena.

But I have picked up the pen only to speak of my story in a very real, natural manner.

But do you know something? It is straightforward people like me who arouse everyone’s interest, as when people are unable to say things directly, there is fun in hearing those things from another’s mouth. Assured by that thought then, let me begin my story? (xv)

The preface thus sets the tone for the manner in which the adult consciousness would impinge on the reminiscences – it does not remain simply a recollection of childhood memories rather becomes an analysis of them and a way of correlating her adult personality with the kind of experiences that she had been privy to in her young days.

In *Kaktaliyo*, Hashem’s identity cannot be thought of in isolation; it is inextricably linked to the group of women that she aligns and conjoins herself with: her mothers and sisters. In the preface, however, she moves beyond familial ties to the larger idea of woman as a cultural construct: something she relates to and yet distances herself from, to develop her autobiographical persona. In this sense, she embodies the desire to alienate herself from “the historically imposed image of self” and “create an alternate self in the autobiographical act” (Friedman 76). As Susan Stanford Friedman had explained:

In taking the power of words, of representation, into their own hands women project onto history an identity that is not purely individualistic. Nor is it purely collective. Instead this new identity merges the shared and the unique. In autobiography, specifically the text created in a woman’s text is often not a “teleological entity,” an isolate being utterly separate from all others, as Gusdorf and Olney define the autobiographical self. (76)

And it is in this space of intersubjectivity, that Hashem locates *Kaktaliyo*, revelling in and celebrating her identity as a woman but also carefully refraining from falling into the pitfalls of essentializing it.

In speaking of the limitations of life-writing, Sudhir Kakar had stated that, "I am as aware as the next person of the impossibility of self-portrayal, the unavoidable omissions and self-deceptions of an undertaking whose only commandment is that the narration of the memories of life should not do any real damage to one's feelings of self-worth" (3). Hashem's peculiar style of self-narration while being a testimony to this understanding, can also be traced back to the relationship that she had with her mother. On the one hand, she had immense respect for her mother, but on the other, she was usually at the receiving end of her mother's beatings, and perennially hungry for her approval. Hashem's mother was the offspring of a poor but brilliant school-inspector and an aristocrat's daughter: this mismatch in terms of social stature became a crucial feature in determining the direction that her life would take. Because of the difficulties that her grandmother had in adjusting to her grandfather's way of life and because of four more children who were born in close succession, Hashem's mother had been brought up not at her parents' place, but in Kolkata, in the mansion of her wealthy grandparents. Unfortunately, apart from religious education and Urdu, she had not been taught much else, in keeping with the trend in well-to-do Muslim families, and had been married off at the age of thirteen to a man fifteen years elder than her.

However, she takes pains to point out that the trajectory that her mother's life had taken was not the norm in the family. Her uncles were all highly educated, with one of them, going to Oxford University for higher studies. Even her *khala* – her mother's younger sister had done her graduation with distinction from Lady Brabourne College. This differential treatment did not bode well for her mother, especially since she had an intense desire to learn, evidenced in the fact that post-marriage she picked up both Bengali and English from her husband, and became proficient enough to write poetry in them.

Her mother, thus, comes across as a strong person with a mind of her own but also as someone battling her inner demons. Hashem has spoken of instances when her mother would disassociate herself from the household, would not find any pleasure in reading books or listening to music – would be depressed, and their daily routines would lose their "rhythm" (149). This phase would not last long, and she would eventually come back and re-immense herself in domesticity, but the frequency of these episodes was aggravated by her mother's sensitive nature, which she used to hide behind a hard and rigid exterior.

She says that she had realized this as an adult in retrospect, but even as a child she remembered her mother saying to her *khala*, on the eve of the latter's marriage that for a woman it was not enough to cook and give birth to children, it was equally important to pursue the talents that one had been born with, something that she had not been able to do (204). As Hashem states:

Probably because she was an artist at heart, the tiniest heartbreak, the minutest thing touched her, plagued her continually; the coarseness of the world outside never attracted her. With this kind of ability to feel, if she could have been immersed in creativity (the possibility of which was very much there in her), maybe then whatever pained her could have turned into a source of joy for her, but lack of opportunity and time did not allow that to materialise in her life. All her creative energies were utilised in giving birth to children, one after another, and in her efforts in raising them well. This is how she finished herself. (149)

This becomes all the more evident in the vehemence with which she reacts when Hashem's *Nani* – her maternal grandmother – proposes that Rosy, her eldest daughter be married off early – keeping in mind that she had six daughters and her husband did not earn well enough to provide them with sufficient dowries (163–164).

This is not to say that the picture that Dilara paints of her mother or for that matter of the relationship between her parents is entirely gloomy. Her father was a rational man, with great respect for education; he was kind, acted responsibly towards his wife and children and was concerned about their future but he could not be a part of the inner world of his wife, with her distinctive personality and a pronounced sense of style. So, while outwardly they seemed to be in harmony, in reality there was a

big gap that he, sadly, did not even realize. As Hashem puts it, “an extrovert and an introvert – Ma and Baba were like two different streams that flowed together side by side for their entire lives” (149).

This undercurrent of dissatisfaction had an unintended impact on Hashem’s psyche and could have been one of the reasons behind Hashem’s sense of distance from her mother as a child. She was the second daughter of her parents – who had to face social censure for bringing three daughters into the world in close succession. Their fourth and fifth offsprings were male – which mitigated the effect to some extent in the societal view, but right at the outset, Hashem had imagined the unconscious neglect that came her way, to be on account of this reason:

[...] giving birth to too many daughters had probably made my mother contemptuous of the entire process. [...] In solitude, she probably sat and wondered, ‘If I have another daughter after these three, what am I going to do – simply a beautiful daughter is not enough’. So, an unintended neglect had been the lot of the next two daughters. They had not consciously done it, and they probably did not even realize that compared to Rosy they had given less attention to Razia and Rehana or loved them any less. [...]

Because she was the youngest, Rehana still got some attention. But even though I was only eleven months and twenty-seven days old, I was elder than her. So everybody used to expect that I would be the understanding one, would take care of myself, and maybe even take care of Rehana. (6-7)

She does not specify the particular form that this slight takes though she portrays her parents conversing on this issue later in the autobiography (243). The only person who is shown directly criticising her mother regarding this is her *Nani*. While her parents were constantly encouraging them to become achievers – her mother used to speak of her daughters becoming Madame Curie, painters or writers, and her father had decided that without completing their post-graduate studies, none of them would get married (165-66) – but the manner in which she sought reassurances as a child, brings out the neglect that came her way.

This becomes especially more evident, in comparison with her sisters. Rosy, the eldest child of her parents had been born after the death of a son. She was the recipient of excessive love and care on account of that, as well as because she was beautiful, studious and responsible. Rehana, or Ruhi, her younger sister, was equally beautiful, if not more than Rosy: even though her birth had not been celebrated like Rosy’s she could attract everybody’s attention because of her brilliance, and her calm nature.

Hashem says she was not only mediocre in looks – she was darker compared to her sisters and did not have their sharp features – but also lacked their sharp intellect or memory. She was commonplace in every sense of the term and this factor affected the manner in which she viewed herself:

I had become very conscious about the way I looked from a very early age. The age at which girls become aware of their looks, I used to keep a broken mirror in my doll’s box much before that, and used to watch myself from multiple angles; make my hair in various styles so as to get more attention than my sisters [...]

In my childhood, since I considered myself ugly compared to my sisters, I used to try all kinds of things to draw the attention of others, to get recognition from them – this was my sole preoccupation. (18)

She not only tried to do everything that would give her importance, she says she also developed the desire to be the best (18). Thus, it is to this sense of inadequacy that she came to develop on account of her sensitive nature, the accident of birth which placed her between Rosy and Ruhi, and her complicated relationship with her mother – that she owes her defining traits – her desire to stand out and her attempt to blend in.

She had other qualities – she was good at sports, excelled at adventurous activities, was courageous and had strength of character. While her sisters, with their looks, intelligence and calm demeanours, fitted in with accepted notions of what *good girls* were supposed to be, she wanted to be appreciated for what she was, even while being a far cry from the conventional presuppositions. She brings out instances when she was praised by her grandfather for being a leader, having initiative (62), her

father for being adventurous and climbing up to the highest point of the Shushunia hills with him, despite having a wound on her head (41–42) – but these were one-off instances.

She was more often than not being criticised, especially by her *Nani* – who found fault with everything she thought or did. She scolds her for being ambitious – Hashem had spoken of her desire of being an artist (56) and for not being a quiet child (51) – but her grandmother's biggest grievance was that she was all that, despite being a girl from a poor family. Her *Nani* was contemptuous of Hashem's father for not earning enough, for producing six daughters, and for having the bad habit of doing charity: she could not speak of him without sneering. In the straightforward world of her immediate family, her grandmother's insinuations came as a surprise to her and she says that she did not know that her father was poor "even in her dreams"; it is only in her grandparents' house that she was made to realize that (55).

Despite these tensions and her own sense of inadequacy, Hashem remembers her childhood as a happy one and speaks about her eventual realization of the atypical expression of her mother's love. Her mother would be uncomfortable with anyone praising any of her children, for fear of them becoming brazen and complacent. However, since Hashem got scolded often, she believed it was her lot alone. This epiphany hits her on reminiscing about an incident involving her *Mejomamu* – her maternal uncle: she had been ill as a child and he had come to visit her. While he was praising her abilities to sketch faces and underlining the necessity of pursuing one's talents, her mother intervened by asking him not to give too much importance to her, lest she drive everyone crazy. She writes that while she was used to being scolded by her mother, at that moment, that statement had brought tears to her eyes:

Now I realize that was the nature of my mother's love. Making fun of minor errors of people close to her, was not in her eyes, demeaning them, rather, that was her way of giving them importance. Her children were like pieces of her heart. Even in her own case, she used to regret her mistakes and her shortcomings more than she celebrated her virtues. Probably, because she could not see her children separate from herself, rather than being proud of our achievements, she would die of shame at the smallest of our failures – real or perceived. [...] Probably, I have been infected by her chronic lack of satisfaction. (47)

Apart from the influence of the familial relations on her psyche, *Kaktaliyo* also brings to the fore the kind of religious education that she had, which led her to develop a strong distaste for religious fanaticism.⁶ She had been brought up in a household where she had been given the necessary religious instructions – she speaks of her mother's strictness in Quran lessons every morning – but her father had also spoken of the importance of understanding that every religion had its own value when she had enquired about what would happen to her Hindu friends, who did not know the teachings of the Quran (145). She had been taught to value human beings by her parents, and that is what gets reflected in her well-balanced responses to critical and sensitive situations as an adult too.⁷

The other trait which defines her to a large extent is the urge to travel, the desire not to be rooted in one place forever. *Kaktaliyo* is as much a description of the places she has been to, as it is an account of the people who have touched her life: this constant sense of being on the move is what defines her as a person. She says that she should have been "born not in the house of a government servant but in the tent of a gypsy" (92). The near nomadic life of her parents – who moved from one place to another frequently – appealed immensely because of this itinerant desire of hers. *Kaktaliyo* is in fact the description of three such places – Bankura, Pabna and Sirajgunj, where her father was posted during her growing up years. Kolkata too, figures as a significant presence because of their frequent visits to the city. This constant sense of moving on – both literally and metaphorically – is what she calls her "philosophy of life" (93): it is only fitting then that the text would be open ended – the beginning of a new journey to Barisal, rather than a definitive closure.

Kaktaliyo stands out not only for its atypical delineation of her character but also for the manner, in which it draws upon the shared syncretic culture of undivided Bengal – a marginalised practice in

Bangladesh, especially after the predominance that Islamic religious identity acquired post 1971, as opposed to earlier emphases on linguistic and cultural identity.⁸ In Hashem's autobiography however, there is no such insecurity to prove allegiance to her Islamic lineage: it is self-evident. It is probably on account of this confidence that she can use instances from Ramayana and Mahabharata liberally,⁹ and speak about how her *Nana* instilled the motto of "*chatranam adhyanam tapah*"¹⁰ in his children's life.

Bengali Muslims were not considered "Muslim enough" for their closeness to Hindu culture and especially their regard for the Bengali language which led to language riots in East Pakistan and finally to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971.¹¹ As Asim Roy has pointed out, this derogatory attitude towards the Muslims of Bengal was not something new rather had been held by scholars for over three centuries. These practices – like participating in the Hindu rituals or interpreting Islam from the standpoint of local perspectives – have been explained either as "semi-conversion" or as "degeneration" in the absence of connection with "true" Islam.¹² But Roy would rather want the phenomenon of "popular" or "folk" Islam to be looked at as "the genius of Islamic tolerance, adaptability and creative dynamism in bringing an incredibly diverse world together into a whole of unity in diversity"¹³ – an absolute necessity dictated by the current global political climate.

This especially becomes clear if the content and the reception of Taslima Nasreen's seven-part autobiography, are recalled here. Nasreen's depiction of her life in a "damaging, dysfunctional family"¹⁴ was considered representative for not only Muslim families but also for Bengalis. Ketaki Kushari Dyson had commented on the politics of usurpation of the text by sections of the media in the then volatile atmosphere of prevailing Islamophobia post 9/11 in America. It remains relevant even today, especially since Nasreen continues to claim that her experiences are universally relevant and that "the sexual molestation of children goes on within every family in Bangladesh, but is not talked about".¹⁵ As Dyson powerfully critiques:

The American publishers of the book have released it under the title *Meyebela/ My Bengali Girlhood/ A Memoir of Growing Up Female/ In a Muslim World*. But the original title is quite simply *Amar Meyebela*, and the Indian edition of the English version, published from Delhi, is likewise titled *My Girlhood/ An Autobiography*. In the American edition the word 'Bengali' has been naughtily slipped in. This adjective serves a political purpose: it manages to stereotype us Bengalis, and robs us, those Bengali women who *have not* experienced a girlhood as damaged and damaging as Taslima's, of our own reasonably normal, happy, and positive childhoods. The subtitle, 'A Memoir of Growing Up Female in a Muslim World', is even naughtier. Apart from the dangerous stereotyping of a Muslim upbringing, the phrasing, in juxtaposition with 'My Bengali Girlhood', almost erases the existence of non-Muslim Bengalis.¹⁶

To put things in perspective, the publication of *Amar Meyebela* (My Girlhood), the first part of Taslima Nasreen's autobiography in 1999, marked a paradigm shift in the tradition of Bengali women's autobiographies. She coined a new term *meyebela* to discuss her childhood, underlining the specific experiences of growing up as a girl in the very title of her work: before *meyebela*, there was no gender-specific term to discuss a girl's childhood in the Bengali language. Earlier women used *chelebela* – literally boyhood – which had come to acquire a unisexual connotation, or *chotobela* to refer to their childhoods.¹⁷ *Amar Meyebela* stands out not only for the neologistic title, but also for its subject matter – an open discussion of corporeality and sexuality, which was continued in the parts which followed – *Utal Haowa* (Turbulent Winds) and *Dwikhandito* (Divided into Two Halves).¹⁸ This is extremely rare in women's autobiographies – consequently, her courage, in being able to write what she does, needs to be acknowledged.

But Nasreen, never grasped that "women's experiences of Islam are myriad, and their subordination is not only based in so-called Islamic practices" despite her own situation (Hashim 12). And this is where Hashem's autobiography – in providing multiplicity of perspectives – challenges this typification: Hashem came from a similar middle-class background, with a mother who was probably similarly or even less educated than Nasreen's mother, and yet because of the personalities of her parents, the peculiarities of her familial situation, and the kind of education that she received, her

experience of growing up in a Bengali Muslim family was completely different compared to the traumatic experiences of Nasreen.

And again, since Hashem's self-narrative rarely privileges victimhood, it does not fit in within the reductive depictions of Islamic religion and culture, prevailing at the time of the publication of these autobiographies: the problems of veiling or not, do not figure at all in her discourse on subjectivity,¹⁹ when the scope of discourse when it came to Muslim women's subjectivities, was limited by predetermined ideas of the "hijab and veiling",²⁰ and it was problematic to speak of *fatwas*, given the obsession with the plight of Muslim women, informed by the "Euro-American fears of a violent Muslim Other".²¹ In *Kaktaliyo*, there is hardly any engagement with these hegemonic presuppositions: whether this is because of her diasporic location – she had moved out of her country before the declaration of its independence in 1971 – and therefore was not an active party to the changes which took place after that, will remain debatable; but what is evident from her life-narrative is that it is neither a reaction against nor an overt endorsement of her religious identity. She ascribes this understanding of Islam to the people who surrounded her – especially her grandfather and father, who were never tired of answering her endless questions as a child. Her father had viewed life from a "rational, unemotional and unprejudiced" angle, and he had extended this point of view to his conception of religion as well, (127) an understanding that he managed to pass on.

Her lukewarm reception in the Western media notwithstanding, Dilara Hashem's *Kaktaliyo* remains an important autobiographical text not only for the particular form that her self-articulation takes, but also what that implies about the discursive space available to her, to express her subjectivity. In highlighting non-conformity and itinerancy, as the determining traits of her personality, and making her religious identity, only a component of it, she was making a very important statement – not only in her individual context, but also in the context of Muslim women, in general. One's own social class, educational qualifications, financial independence, and family background determine the extent to which Islamic practices impact the life of a woman: there can be no pre-determined prism of looking at such lives, making reductionist readings untenable. *Kaktaliyo*, certainly remains a testimony to this.

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Notes

¹ The reference is to autobiographies by women writers in West Bengal as well as Bangladesh, with the exception being Taslima Nasreen. For a detailed discussion of the self-censorship that these autobiographers subjected themselves to see Maitreyee Chattopadhyay, "Na Bola Banir Ghana Jamini," (The Dense Darkness of Unsaid Words) *Naishabda Bhenge: Atmakathane Bharatiya Nari* ed. Ishita Chakravarti et al. (Kolkata: Khoj Ekhon Parishad and Stree, 2005) 227–8.

² Dilara Hashem, *Kaktaliyo* (1985; Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1999) xi. All translations from the original Bengali text are mine unless otherwise stated.

³ See Ali Riaz, "Constructing Outraged Communities and State Responses: The Taslima Nasreen Saga in 1994 and 2007", *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 2008, 31 December 2008 (<http://samaj.revues.org/index1262.html>) (doi.org/10.4000/samaj.1262).

⁴ Why such writing continues to be prevalent becomes clear from the acerbic reception of writers who defy the expected paradigm – like Hashem's contemporary from Bangladesh – Taslima Nasreen. Her autobiography and the controversies surrounding them make explicit the implicit understanding of gendered subjectivity and the unwritten rules of conduct which women writers are to be subject to. See Sabyasachi Bandopadhyay,

- "What Dhaka Does Yesterday, Kolkata Does Today: Bans Taslima", *Indian Express*, 15 November 2003. The argument against the interdiction also lays bare such presuppositions: see Mahasweta Devi, "Boi Nishiddha Kora Chole Na", (Books cannot be banned) *Desh*, 17 December 2003, 89-91 and Shibnarayan Ray, "Banya Golaper Sugandha" (The Scent of a Wild Rose) *Desh*, 17 December 2003, 44-49.
- ⁵ See Dilara Hashem, Interview with Ahsanul Haq, *Washington Barta*, Voice of America, 14 April 2011 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_icq9Y2kno8).
- ⁶ A teenage boy had committed suicide on account of being beaten up mercilessly by his excessively conservative father: Hashem's family had gone numb with guilt at this incident as they had complained to the boy's father earlier, regarding the romantic letters that he had sent to Rosy. They had expected him to be told off, but not this tragic end. See Hashem, *Kaktaliyo*, 152-3.
- ⁷ When Badar, her father's *chaprasi* had been attacked by a snake and had blood all over his legs, Dilara's mother washed his legs, despite his protestations. There are innumerable such examples when her parents taught her to treat human beings alike, irrespective of their religion or status in life. See Hashem, *Kaktaliyo*, 25.
- ⁸ Bangladesh had been founded as a secular state, in accordance with its Constitution adopted in 1972. However, after the assassination of Bangladesh's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1975, General Ziaur Rahman, made certain amendments to the Constitution, which compromised its secular character, and allowed religion-based-politics. In 1982, General Ershad made Islam the state religion – a gross deviation from the original Constitution, based on secular "Bengali Nationalism" on which the Liberation War of 1971 was based. Haroon Habib draws attention to these events in the light of attempts to restore the secular Constitution in Bangladesh by the Sheikh Hasina led government. See Haroon Habib, "Bangladesh: restoring secular Constitution" *The Hindu*, 25 June 2011 (<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article2132333.ece>).
- ⁹ While describing the children of a relative, her mother had referred to them as having "eyes like Garuda"; drawing attention to the mythical bird of Ramayana, who had tried to save Sita from Ravana's clutches. Again, pointing out the danger of giving free rein to Hashem, she had chastised her brother by saying – "Eka Rame rokkha nei, tai Sugreeb dosar" [Ram alone is not enough, he had to have Sugreeb as a companion]. These statements are made in a matter-of-fact manner, as a part of regular speech. See Hashem, *Kaktaliyo*, 58, 46.
- ¹⁰ The Sanskrit saying means students should treat studying as meditation. See Hashem, *Kaktaliyo*, 65.
- ¹¹ For a detailed discussion of this, see Asim Roy, "Thinking over 'Popular Islam' in South Asia: Search for a Paradigm" *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics*, ed. Mushirul Hasan and Asim Roy (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005) 34-35.
- ¹² Asim Roy, "Thinking over 'Popular Islam' in South Asia", 35-38.
- ¹³ Asim Roy, "Thinking over 'Popular Islam' in South Asia", 60-61.
- ¹⁴ See Ketaki Kushari Dyson, "Some Reflections on the Art of Taslima Nasrin", Uttarshuri.net. 16 May 2003 (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/uttarshuri/message/479>).
- ¹⁵ Ketaki Kushari Dyson, "Some Reflections on the Art of Taslima Nasrin".
- ¹⁶ Ketaki Kushari Dyson, "Some Reflections on the Art of Taslima Nasrin".
- ¹⁷ Lila Majumdar, for instance, in her autobiography *Pakdandi* (A Circuitous Mountainous Trail), uses the term *chotobela* to discuss her childhood. Ashalata Sen uses the term *shaishab* – literally infancy, to discuss her earlier years in *Sekaler Katha* (The Story of Those Days). See Lila Majumdar, *Pakdandi* (1986; Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2008). Also, Ashalata Sen, *Sekaler Katha* (1990; Kolkata: Naya Udyog, 1996).
- ¹⁸ *Dwikhandito* was published as *Ka* (Speak Up) in Bangladesh.
- ¹⁹ The only time that Dilara mentions a burqa is when she sees a woman entering a public bath in Kolkata, wearing what she describes as a "white cover". She was six years old then and had not encountered it in her immediate surroundings. See Hashem, *Kaktaliyo*, 106-7.
- ²⁰ Fauzia Ahmad, "Still 'In Progress?' – Methodological Dilemmas, Tensions and Contradictions in Theorizing South Asian Muslim Women", *South Asian Women in the Diaspora*, ed. Nirmal Puwar and Parvati Raghuram (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003) 45.
- ²¹ Quoting Lila Abu-Lughod, who compared the attempt to discuss problems of Muslim women with being in a minefield in the global political climate which is obsessed with 'the plight of Muslim woman', Dina Mahnaz Siddiqi draws attention to the usurpation of the space by competing discourses. See Dina Mahnaz Siddiqi, "Islam, Gender and the Nation: The Social Life of Bangladeshi Fatwas", *Communalism and Globalization in South Asia and its Diaspora*, ed. Chandana Mathur and Deana Heath (London: Routledge, 2011) 182.

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‘...A Little Girl Who Owns a City and a River’: Girls on the Move During the 1971 War of Bangladesh in Lily Halder’s *Bhanga Berhar Panchali* and Sanchita Roy’s *Ongar*

PARAMITA PURKAYASTHA

Abstract: Bangladesh has the distinction of being the first South Asian country to historically own the regional reality of nations being carved out of women’s bodies. Consequently, women who do not fit the ‘birangona’¹ or ‘muktijoddha’² categories have been effectively invisibilized. In my paper, I will look at Lily Halder’s *Bhanga Berhar Panchali* (*The Tale of the Broken Fences*) (2019) and Sanchita Roy’s *Ongar* (*Embers*) (2009), to examine two such un-categorized experiences during the 1971 War. The first book is the author’s autobiography and includes her involvement in the war effort while the second documents the experiences of crossing the border from East Pakistan to West Bengal during the war. In my paper, I will look at how these two authors ending up in the same city experienced migration differently as female adolescents in the texts, even when tied together by the same religion, same caste position, and the same event.

Keywords: War, migration, citizenship, woman, categories

Introduction

My paper primarily focuses on the dialectic between the woman as the sign and the woman as the subject. I will attempt to examine the experiences of two adolescent girls occupying similar social rungs during the same event to understand a very fundamental negotiation, that between the individual versus the group, during a time of conflict, a war to be very precise. The construction of the poor immigrant woman needing rescue by or deportation from a host community (in this case the Indian nation) requires the uniformization of such women with varied experiences. It is not only helplessness, but also anger which is collectivised, sometimes deliberately and meticulously, to justify those ends. Following Brubaker, nation is a category of practice, not merely a category of analysis. Feelings of national belonging must be constantly reproduced via institutions and symbolic practices in order to keep the imagined community in existence, and secured through ‘compulsory participation in institutions such as schools, national language, military’ and ‘the consumption of national images, words, symbols in newspapers, art and so on, which tallies with Anderson’s analysis of the initiated community (Anderson, 1991)’ (Heaney). These ‘intra-institutional activities are contrasted with the extra-institutional political emotions created by communities of feeling (Berezin, 2002, p. 43)’ which are associated with collective action, collective violence and ritual. These rituals, or what might be called ‘state-framed communities of feeling’, lead to the consequent creation of ‘counter-state communities of feeling’, which are associated with social movements, and possibly with revolutionary movements and riots ‘... that serve as arenas of emotion, bounded spaces where citizens enact and vicariously experience collective national self-hood . . .’ (Heaney), thus making familiarity and identity co-terminous. The repeated experience of ritual participation produces a feeling of solidarity and collective memory. The passing of the 2019 CAA and its aftermath demonstrates this in the context of the issue of citizenship being dealt with in this paper.

The Texts: Background and Reception

Lily Halder's *Bhanga Berar Panchali* is the first volume of her autobiography, and chronicles her poverty-stricken adolescence, her participation as a student in Bangladesh's Liberation Movement, her struggles in college and in her job as a Dalit woman availing reservation, her marriage, and finally her life as a poet and traveller who wants to give back to her community. Sanchita Roy's *Ongar* is a text that the author classifies as a memoir which details the journey of a young girl named Sudeshna from the erstwhile East Pakistan to West Bengal in order to escape the military crackdown during the war of 1971.

Lily Halder's *Bhanga Berar Panchali* was published in 2019. In the preface of this book written by Shashim Kumar Barui, he locates the work as a Dalit woman's autobiography. In the context of the little visibility of Dalit women authors in Bangla, Halder's autobiography is a remarkable achievement indeed, especially considering that she is actually a poet who is writing prose.

Two points in the preface seemed to me to be somewhat incongruent to the author's perspective in the book, though the fact that the preface has been included also displays the author's acceptance of that framework. Nevertheless, the gaps between the two exist, and I will spend a few words on them.

The first is Barui's idealization of Lily both as a Dalit woman and as a participant in the anti-Pakistan struggle. In a context where social and material emancipation of women is incongruently distributed across categories, it is a rather simplistic exercise for a man to make the claim that Dalit women are the most emancipated.

The other is specifically contextualising the book as giving a voice to Hindu refugees. Barui rightly points out the protracted nature of emigration from East Pakistan, where the more affluent, mostly upper caste people came into West Bengal following more immediate persecution during and after Partition, and the predicament following Jogendranath Mandal's disappointment in hopes of a Dalit-Muslim unity. But Barui also includes some statistics on Hindu emigration which are not referenced. To Barui's credit, he does not sentimentalise. The reader can trace his indignation at the atrocities that Lily had suffered as a Dalit woman, because those are also his indignations. But such framing makes it difficult to determine where the self of the woman ends and the community begins. It is not possible to know whether these incongruities would have existed for me as a reader had the preface been written by another Dalit woman author. Patricia Waugh has argued that the introduction of women's texts into the canon of autobiography has disrupted generic presuppositions because women have relational, or more fragmented selves. As a result, fiction and other people's biographies will inadvertently enter their 'autobiographies'.

Sanchita Roy's *Ongar* was published in 2009. I could not trace any academic or literary reception of that book and was informed of its existence only during my fieldwork. The book's short introduction is by Sabita Choudhury, where she testifies to the emotive power of the author, and concludes by writing that 'the evaluation of the author's writing is now in your (the reader's) hands'. It is not a critical introduction to the book, rather an affective one.

To proceed with the 'girls on the move' from the title, the East Pakistani woman had (and continues to have) various stereotypes among different groups of people both in Pakistan and in India, as can be found in the literatures of Intizar Hussain, Razia Fasih Ahmed and O. V. Vijayan, to name a few, so much so that the Bengali woman of 1971 continues being a trope serving various ends. She is a dark-skinned, sensuous, fiery figure in a *bindi* and a saree whose honour is the bone of contention among the groups of men involved. But woman (and man) is an essential category that it is a discursive category which has been constructed. With this I do not intend to remove the agency of women, rather as Judith Butler has argued, construction and agency are not inimical to each other. Rather construction forms the setting for agency, thus creating the space to study the relationship between agency and cultural constructions. In both the texts, while the relationships between the women populating them are mostly personal, the political and the public sphere, and even their excursions into the private, are inadvertently populated by men, something these women are acutely aware of.

Following from this, what with each person being an individual, the innumerable variations justify the individual accounts, countering the claims of some scholars that there has been a proliferation of 'trauma industry' as far as this particular war is concerned. In a world characterized by the increasing entry of the state into the lives of people in its efforts at paper-citizen formation, personalization and individuation are the easiest and most immediate means of humanization. That men have written more about their migration experiences and identities across class and caste categories in general, as have women with certain social capitals during the '47 Partition, subsuming many other narratives in the process which have emerged in subsequent Partition research (Butalia, et al) point towards this. Is it because individualism is more accepted in men who feel themselves to be enactors of larger sacrifices? Continued individuation and personalization through recognizing new subjectivities is what can sustain democratization of these pedagogies and scholarship.

The 'Bangladeshi' women

As the above section indicates, the term 'woman' deserves problematization in this context because the effects of war (and violence in general) are not the same for all women. Experiences vary according to class, caste, age, time of migration, the various other social locations which help or restrict women to process the events even after the war, and finally, their individual disposition. There is need for a greater problematization of the idea of the Bangladeshi 'refugee' (in common parlance, immigrant factually) woman based on the various experiences and subjectivities that exist within that superimposed category. While today in India 'Bangladeshi' is a pejorative largely meaning the Muslim infiltrator, people of Bangladeshi descent in India consist of Partition refugees as well as the steady stream of immigrants which cascaded during the Liberation War in the border states of West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, and some other north-eastern states like Meghalaya.

So, it can be seen that the Bangladeshi immigrant woman is a complex, externally assembled category and therefore the notion of the agentive, liberated 'bengal' women would not adequately define them. This particular idea has been examined considerably in the context of '47 Partition (Chakraborty, et al), but needs examining for the migrant women in the subsequent years as well owing to the importance that is accorded to certain women in various communities, especially during this particular war. The inverse relationship between the progress in years and the diminishing of the respectability accorded to immigrant women seeking out sustenance in India is discussed by Archit Basu-Guha Chowdhury in his article 'Engendered Freedom: Partition and East Bengali Migrant Women'. Even the Partition women did not have it easy, as he writes that like in all patriarchal societies, the woman in a traditional Bengali family was allowed to tend only to the home while the man formed the economic backbone of the family. 'The outlook was not towards self-liberation but towards supplementing financial provisions for the family... The nascent stages of public duty vis-à-vis domestic duty were fraught with conflicts of gender in particular that were overcome only after gradual exposure to the outside world.' The women of the eastern half of Bengal appeared more liberated to the people of the western half because they were more proximate to the raw materials of production, as opposed to the gentrified and industrialised West (especially Kolkata). This was largely owing to self-respect movements like those among the Namashudras, and because they had an urgent need for employment after crossing the border. Nivedita Menon refers to Mark Galanter in her essay 'Is Feminism about 'Women'? A Critical View on Intersectionality from India' and writes that identities are fluid, and people respond through particular identities as subjects, rather than those identities being piled one on top of the other like essentials. I would like to modify this by saying that this is especially pronounced during periods of social volatility. This point of identity being the interplay of power relationships becomes pronounced when we see the affective, and then legislative and executive divisions, that occur based on the complicated reception of the East Bengali women over the years- while those during '47 are considered empowered in the national imagination, the latter are impudent.

The homogenization of women during state endeavours, specifically the citizenship exercises, erases their personhood and leaves them at the mercy of documents, something which women before the end of the twentieth century were not systemically empowered to possess. So delineating the pitfalls of categorization in real life is important to challenge the cluster of ideas which have evolved around the figure of the Bangladeshi refugee. As Nayanika Mookherjee writes: 'This infantilising model of Bangladesh is omnipresent in NGOs, international policies and national governments.... Bangladesh is truly the 'subaltern' (Guha 1983) within South Asian studies' (78).

This, in turn, points to multiple subalternizations— the Bangladeshi as the eternal subaltern, and the Bangladeshi Muslim and the Bangladeshi Dalit as two different groups of subalterns (the former being in respect to India). In accordance with this, Mookherjee writes: 'The complicated relationship between well-off migrant women who are seen to have agency by virtue of their symbolic and social capital, remain unexplored' (78). Of course, any Hindu Bangladeshi immigrant, though qualifying for recognition as refugee, should always be mourned as the eternal victim of Muslim persecution, but never be empathized with or treated as an equal, for any attempt at equality can only imply parasitism. Class is integral to this, as Sanchita Ray writes: 'Sudeshna always used to think, to these people they were like some demon from some alien planet. Uneducated junglees (sic). Maybe the locals did not think so much but she used to feel so. Maybe that was called 'inferiority complex'. It would happen if someone spent quite a few days in someone's place uninvited. A few times Sudeshna would go to a relative's door but remembering self-respect would return to the camp. And yet in spite of all this, something that made her feel good was that those people in her village whose feet almost did not touch the ground due to money and pride, they too would burn under the joishtho³ sun in the tent with the other people. No soft beds, no electric fans' (58).

Popular media representations of the war would belie these complexities too, even though in both the texts discussed the women are very active participants in their lives and the world around them. While they undergo suppression, they conduct their family affairs, they participate in social movements, they create, and most importantly, they are educated. Both the women write in ample detail in multiple places about the books they had read, in the case of Sudeshna, the books she had to leave behind, and for Lily, the authors, poets and activists she had collaborated with while being affected by events herself. The point is not the contention of the existence of some 'true' subaltern (like the raped women, for instance, who do not speak by and large but rather the divergence of all media towards the creation of a particular refugee image, and its afterlife and implications).

This selective silencing has several consequences. First, it enables the victim-agent binary while identifying with the refugee who is poor and raped. Second, 'the agentive-victim argument gets differently framed to create a more empathetic identification with the middle class agentive refugees, which I would argue is linked to the aesthetics of war' (Mookherjee 89). Thus, the existence of middle-class immigrants to India following the war is conveniently overlooked, and the lower class-caste 'refugee' is to be both pitied and feared. The general body and person of the refugee was seen by both the 'ghotis'⁴ and the earlier generations of 'bangals' as disruptive to sovereign and public health, thus creating affective borders, and this was compounded by the '71 refugees being mostly 'lower-caste' in number (Datta). 'Without an account of the multiplicity of migration experiences, what remains obscure is the gendered and classed relationships between refugees, something which is integral to the understanding of gendered social relationships during times of conflict' (Mookherjee 91). My primary reason for juxtaposing these two texts is to show that while both the girls who belong to the same religion and occupy the same caste position in the texts end up in Kolkata, their selves are formed differently in the texts even when they are tied to the same event. The distance increases with the climb up the social ladder, creating uneven control over representation and formation of subjectivity.

Limits of National Categories in Women's Articulations

The concept of Birangona emphasises sacrifice through her rape, thus validating her social death and even enforced death. She has to obliterate herself in order to contribute palatably to the nation,

or is obliterated in 'historical' human rights discourse, as elaborated in detail by Nayanika Mookherjee when she writes about how the narratives of certain Birangonas were made to fit the image of the woman who is ashamed, sad, destroyed, abandoned after her rape. Otherwise, hinting at the presence of any social support for the rape victims within the particular frameworks that they inhabit, would imply an end to their trauma and put them back into the fold of 'normal' women. When a woman writes a memoir of 1971, she is a middle-class woman who has not been raped and has considerable political clarity and agency. The raped birangona never writes her own story. She is present only through her absence, leading a spectral, uncanny existence. She is a 'character' in other people's stories, further conflating the borders between genres, truth and fiction.

Then there is the eroticisation and commodification, unqualifiedly by men (but also consumed by women) of the birangona, which are beyond the purviews of this paper. Enloe writes that the 'tendency of masculinist discourses of war to generalise women as victims (and men as the militia) [divert] the gaze from exactly the 'conditions and decisions' that turned them into casualties in the service of nationalist mobilisation' (Das 2:4).

Of course, there are deviations within these frameworks and parameters. To activist credit, in Bangladesh there has been an effort to bring under the notion of 'muktijoddha' the non-militant women who engaged in caregiving work. As can be seen in works like Helena Khan's 'Virangana' and Shaheen Akhtar's *Talaash*, literature becomes a means of both introspection and catharsis. Fiction with birangonas from mid-1970s to the 1990s 'pointed out the uncomfortable history of society's complicity with rapists and mapped the atrocities perpetrated by collaborators onto the history of rape' (Mookherjee 209).

Narratives beyond nationalist purviews like the texts that I deal with in this paper have better formed subjects with agency, like the Bangladeshi women memoirists. Nevertheless, it is important to look at how war trauma becomes a mere continuation of these women's other lived experiences (and vice-versa) in the context of the gendered nation-state in these two texts. In the texts themselves, Lily is threatened by male political activists, and Sudeshna's (and her family's) flight is premised precisely on her pubescence. This contextualization is necessary in order to examine the motivations and influences under which the interior is exteriorized over time within a framework where the cut-off date for Indian citizenship is effectively 24th March, 1971⁵, with women also being among the worst affected during the Assam NRC process. Robin Neustaeter's definition of peace is relevant here: 'While peace is the absence of violence, it is not the absence of conflict. Peace is collaborative, just, and nonviolent responses to conflict' (168). Lily Halder's father, who moved to Kolkata with his father in 1946, fails to uphold standards as a parent during the crisis brought on by the 1971 war. His sudden and extreme religiosity during the financial crisis in West Bengal following the war makes him neglect his son's health leading to the latter's death. He recklessly spends the little money that he earns on godmen, thus pushing both Lily and her mother to resort to health-shattering labour that has long-term consequences especially for the mother. Yet he reclaims his role as the patriarch in charge of his daughter's public politics when he refuses to allow her to join Maulana Bhashani's⁶ poetry initiative 'Hakkatha' at the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra as that might 'attract trouble'. This, though her regular life consisted of participating in the war effort (the reader is not intimated about whether her father knew about this) like listening to and supporting liberation fighters who had come to her school, walking in processions, writing poems, and dealing with the various other difficulties that had cropped up in West Bengal during the war which she details minutely. She is very precise in her words: 'No, nobody taught us anything in those days. We used to do these things from the inside' (70). As for the slightly younger Sudeshna, for whom the events that are described are more immediate and less analyzed, the war days are almost a catastrophic break from her seemingly peaceful life in East Pakistan. And yet in terms of the changed course of her life's direction even after the return of national stability, her expanded understanding in terms of the events she witnesses, and most prominently through her raped friend Polly, who is reduced to a

permanently vegetative state after her rape⁷ and which affects Sudeshna deeply, the war gets firmly situated within the historical paradigm of the 'everyday', as opposed to an aberration or 'madness', or even an out of normal experience through which war is generally defined, or how it comes across in superimposed processes of documentation and commemoration.

Under such circumstances, where even apparently restorative state exercises are actually disruptive to the lives of numerous women, it is very difficult to draw clear boundaries between peace and conflict, friend and foe, trauma and triumph.

The Woman as a Subject in the Texts and the City

'Bachelard (1994: 4), writing on the poetics of space, differentiates a geographical or an ethnographical study of 'home' from a phenomenological one which would 'seize upon the germ of the sure, immediate well-being it encloses' (Chanda 5). But such affective economies of well-being are not constructed adequately, if at all, owing to the general silence that pervades discussions on gendered responses. These silences are conveyed very subtly through writing, thus framing them within expression. While Sudeshna had to leave behind the place of her birth, Lily was sent to her grandmother at Durbajpur as a child to decrease the pressure on her parents who subsequently had two sons. While Lily was brought back to the city in 1961 by her father to be admitted to the school and grew up to be the primary caregiver of her family, Sudeshna did not return with her family once Bangladesh came into being but was sent to Delhi under the guardianship of her mama⁸, and she does not specify the reason behind this. These women were moved to and fro in their formative years, and coupled with other experiences of dislocation and pain, there is a sense of their selves being constructed as an outsider in the texts, which could be the result of their aforementioned sense of dislocation being compounded by their dislocation from their own families. To sum it up in Chanda's words: 'What hopes and dreams does she harbour that cause her to break the mould of the 'girl'? How does she struggle to fulfil these dreams and hopes? When and why is she happy and what makes her yearn for the safe comfort of home where nothing is to be worried about and all is taken care of, until this unrippling calm becomes deadly boring?' (17), the last part being a constant negotiation between force and agency in the case of these girls.

Women experience the city differently in the sense they are constrained by restrictions arising from traditional gender roles and positions. And what is immensely essential in all instances of survival in a city like Kolkata for women who have considered themselves perpetual outsiders are the homosocial bonds, mostly formed with other women with relatable experiences who help each other by transmitting knowledge or through direct contact. The city of Kolkata is not some utopia, but often a place that is the most convenient, mostly due to the cheap rates and the well-connected transport system. Of course, there are variations in each of these experiences, for instance, Lily having a better knowhow of the city as compared to Sudeshna, which also enables her to look at the war and the refugees more objectively. Elspeth Probyn's definition of gender is the most suitable here (1993: 3): 'gender must be represented as processes that proceed through experience ... ways to talk about individuation without going through the individual and that I can talk about my experience of being in the society without subsuming hers' (Chanda 16).

When it comes down to forming their selves within the city(s), even when both women perform citizenship in the most basic sense of the term by continuously evaluating, negotiating with, and trying to improve their lives and of those around them, Lily comes out as the more empowered woman. Being the daughter of Partition immigrants, Lily has an innate sense of legitimacy that makes her acutely aware of, and fight for, her rights. She belongs somewhere, even if that place is constantly threatened. In her narrative, she displays an awareness of her difference from the Marichjhapee refugees as well as the relatives from East Pakistan who were seeking refuge at her place during the war. For Sudeshna though, rights are something she must constantly look for and come up with. While that effectively makes her more agentive, since she doesn't have a certain

place, dislocation and dissociation pervade her entire life. For Lily, politics is something that she can critique, that she can form, that she can participate in, and most significantly, she can put to writing. For Sudeshna in *Ongar*, 'rajneeti' (politics) is 'shorbonasha niti' (the principle of destruction) (62).

Genre: Autobiography, Testimonio or Fiction?

Since my paper is on uncategorized experiences, I look at how they have been expressed, and the role writing plays in documenting both the words and the silences. Lily Halder's is an autobiography that focuses more on her caste subjectivity than on the war, while Sanchita Roy's work is a document doing the opposite, and having a lead with a different name at that. These beg the question— can these be considered testimonios? I would say yes, because that is one mode of specifically feminist pedagogy that balances the individual politically within the collective. The ever-continuing debates regarding generic specifications notwithstanding, the relationship among testimonio, autobiography, and what qualifies as literature in this particular context merits attention (notably, Lily epigraphs each of her chapters with one of her own poems). What are the yardsticks for such categorizations? Derrida in his 'The Law of Genre' writes about the persistent exclusionary characteristic of genre formation, so what might get excluded in the claims of a piece of writing being 'literary'? Leigh Binford writes that testimonio is a hybrid form that represents 'the conversion of oral testimony into writing'. 'By equating history and literature with writing (and modern culture) and folktales and testimonies with orality (and traditional culture),' Western intellectuals like Levi-Strauss 'have vigorously defended their disciplines in order to prevent their contamination by an indigestible Other'. 'But testimonio, written like literature and occasionally endowed with recognizable artistic merit' (Binford 16–17), demands thinking about the category of Literature itself, and the limits and exclusions that the discipline encompasses.

In other words, the works which I consider here, regardless of the degrees of fictionalisation that they follow, qualify as testimonios, with their implications of loss and recovery, of what is missing and what is possible, featuring 'interplay between lament and resistant promise, between oppressed individuals and the awakening collective' (Foster 65). Any writing which speaks of a larger political truth, especially a subverting one, has testimonial features.

Both Lily and Sanchita adopt occasional modes of distancing, especially between their purported past and their present selves. Lily Halder begins her account with 'She ('They' in Bengali) was born in the year 1957....'. She shifts to the first person only in the second paragraph with an act that is among her earliest memories of subjecthood— 'In my childhood when I used to walk along the village path....' (21).

The relationship between the different selves is even more complicated in Sanchita Roy's case. In her foreword, she writes

The incidents in this book are not merely imaginary pictures, they are my family's awful experiences. The experiences which are the same as that of thousands of other families. A huge section of the readership is of those who had not been born then, a section of those who were very young then— those who had heard only stories from their mothers and fathers. Another section is like me, who are eyewitnesses, the victims of bitter experience. For everyone, this is a small attempt from me. Some might have been erased from my memory, for which my apologies to the other eyewitnesses.

And yet, the entire account that follows is through the eyes of a character called Sudeshna. We do not know the relationship between the author who owns the experiences in the foreword, and the narrator. What is the purpose of the construction of 'Sudeshna'? This ambiguity is not uncommon among women leading doubtful existences within political contexts, in the sense that they do not get the chance to form coherent, secure selves under immense pressure, which the idea of traditional, factual, even historical autobiographies demand. Also, the self is necessarily fictitious, formed as it is by recollection, reconstruction and other's perceptions (Evans). We get a similar ambiguity in Aquila Ismail's *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, where the relationship between the author evoking witness

and the narrator of the story is not clearly delineated. Both these authors have a considerable distance from the selves that they are creating in their texts. We do not know where the author ends and the reader begins, especially in texts where there clearly is an invitation to imagine and construct. This brings forth a few questions which will be looked at better in the next section— who is the imagined reader? What is the purpose of the construction of the text? And what purposes can these texts serve?

Some Questions

As we see from the above, boundaries between the public and the private become stronger as one climbs up the social order, and this creates a disjuncture in the formulation and enactment of refugee relief initiatives. It also leads to alienation of the women from their own experiences— the post-Partition sacrifices do not have as much respectability owing to their dilemma at not having followed the two-nation theory, and this shame compounds the other shames which might be present— of physical and mental violation, of being vulnerable to their own men who might exploit them for both economic and political ends⁹, of being vulnerable to men (and women) in the host communities, and the like.

This in turn leads to a very important concern— the defining and the appropriation of trauma. In the face of the effect of any inflicted violence extending across generations, what is war trauma exactly? This contextualisation is necessary in order to examine the motivations and influences under which the interior is exteriorised over time. During a war, the very mechanisms that are supposed to protect a citizen turn against them. But do they return to normal once the war ends? What are the implications of agency as far as this particular aspect is concerned— where does the self end and the state begin?

The question of agency vis a vis state (through documentation) becomes important in the light of the fact that a spectrum is formed between the two, with citizenship exercises where all subjectivity is erased in the face of the larger state machinery being the extreme manifestation of the latter. As this affected all women, cascading down due to the pyramid effect characterising most social inequities, this merits the questions— in the nation's inability to conceive women as natural citizens during its practice as mentioned in the introduction, is the state specifically anti-women¹⁰? In this question, I include both cis-women and trans-women.

Referring back to the section where I cited Patricia Waugh's notions about the impact of women's fragmented selves on life writing, I would like to further qualify those fragments in the context of my texts as fragments of memory, remembering itself being inherently a selective process (something both Halder and Roy acknowledge in their texts). Under such circumstances, 'academic' research can only proceed by acknowledging the gaps among these fragments. In other words, it is concepts, whatever their form, that fill up those fragments. To add to that, 'War and conflict are events that in most cases imply a shift in discourse and ideology' (Michielsens, 184–185), making writing an autobiography an act committed by multiple selves. Generic stratifications under such circumstances can be very difficult to hold on to.

As Magda Michielsons writes, the dominant challenge is making old contexts relate to the new. For instance, Barui classifies Rashshundari Devi, born into a wealthy zamindar family, as a marginal woman. Which she indeed was in her time, but in the 21st century, can a woman born in a family with the wealth of a zamindar, even if oppressed, be marginal? What I have observed in these texts though, is the opposite – that certain times and spaces of history can invade our present even though we did not inhabit those junctures. These texts testify to that. And in more unholy ways, certain markers, be they texts, images, or ideas, can be kept alive to serve larger community projects.

Conclusion

The women taking centre stage in this paper are effectively peace activists. The intention here is not essentializing women as inherently peaceful beings, but rather acknowledging and enhancing

the role they might play in building peace. This is important considering the fact that women's traditional caregiving roles are regarded as domestic and valueless and even anti-feminist in certain contexts. And while Lily receives some state acknowledgment for her initiative as a student (she was awarded by Bangladesh's Vidyasagar Society in 2012), there is no specific name for the kind of work that both Lily and Sudeshna did (and continue doing) during and after the war. It entailed 'new opportunities (Bop 2001) and new responsibilities—most notably economic provisions—for their families, but also new forms of management, decision-making, and administrative tasks, such as dealing with officials and governments' (Mookherjee 76).

As Robin Neustater writes, 'These public acts of caring occur within the everyday routines of living (work, play, sleep, eat, etc.) and are normalized so that they often are only noticed by their absence or a complaint (Dominelli, 1995)' (167). In the texts, Lily Halder and Sudeshna both grow up to be married women firmly located within their communities, and display degrees of selfhood based on their participation in their society. And neither of these women, even when writers and poets themselves, set out as radical revolutionaries taking on the society but as democratic participants wanting to make their lives, and those of the people around them, better. They do not conceive it as a matter of the self versus the society, but how the society and the self sustain each other even when the relationship is not always amiable.

It is going to be a long time before women *de facto* qualify as citizens, even those performing traditional womanhood. As Mrinalini Sinha has pointed out, to 'bring a global perspective to gender' means not seeing the world through a universalising perspective, but 'taking theoretical cognisance of the local and empirical,' thus producing a 'dense contextual analysis.' This move would protect us against two tendencies—'false analogies between different historical formations,' and naturalising the present, thus limiting the possibilities of the future. It would also open us to a feminist politics 'whose concepts and strategies are flexible enough to respond to changing conditions'.

At the same time, it needs to be remembered that '...the state is never a unified and transparent entity in itself as to interpret, correctly or incorrectly, identities around it' (Menon). Because as these texts demonstrate, such voices already exist. 'Women's community peacebuilding experiences and initiatives are rooted in the local context far away from the elite-level peace players and processes, such as high-level diplomacy and peace-treaty negotiations' (Neustater 169), stemming from and leading back to the point that women are not *de facto* citizens. The need is to look at how intersections function during strenuous experiences like community conflict, and work at the deficient areas of power in those identity relations accordingly.

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Notes

* All English translations of portions from *Ongar* and *Bhanga Berhar Panchali* are mine.

¹ The term used by Sheikh Mujibur Rehman to refer to the raped women of East Pakistan in his efforts at integrating them within the new nation.

² Liberation war fighter, and in the case of the numerically far lesser recognised women, who were combatants. The nurses and other such caregivers were also included within its ambit.

- ³ The month of 'jyestha' in the Saka calendar, corresponding to high summer.
- ⁴ Term for the Bengalis indigenous to West Bengal.
- ⁵ The last day before the launching of West Pakistan's military offensive against the eastern wing, also the cut-off date in the 1974 Indira–Mujib Accord.
- ⁶ Also known as the 'Red Maulana', Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani was an influential political figure in East Bengali and East Pakistani politics.
- ⁷ Polly does not return to Bangladesh either. And nor do notions like victory and freedom mean anything to her.
- ⁸ Bengali for maternal uncle.
- ⁹ For instance, in *Ongar*, women like Milu's thamma (paternal grandmother) get randomly abandoned by their own families just because they can.
- ¹⁰ There has already been considerable theorising on this (see MacKinnon, Hoffman, Pateman, Mukhopadhyay and Singh). From all of this, what I would like to filter out is that participation in the public sphere, taken as crucial to citizenship, does not extend to women or the non-cis-heterosexual.

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The Captive Body in Minakshi Sen's *Jeler Bhitor Jel*

SHAYANTANI DAS

Abstract: The connection commonly made between a subject and the ability to claim movement, understand oneself in relation to the world, and maintain a sense of self accessed through bodily autonomy become problematic when the body in discussion is that of the prisoner. The article aims to look at the conditions and limits of the autobiographical self in Minakshi Sen's work *Jeler Bhitor Jel* (1994). By taking a work of prison writing as the object of analysis, the paper hopes to comment upon the political and artistic strategies used by Sen to narrativize the lives of fellow female inmates, construct the autobiographical self and explore the captive bodies of women.

Keywords: Life-writing, prison writing, women's narratives, criminology, subjectivity

I. Introduction

In recent academic scholarship, the body has emerged as an active site for many discussions in the fields of cultural and gender studies. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, the body isn't an inert, passive, non-cultural, or ahistorical term; it is, instead, the site of contestation, in "a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles" (1994: 19). Bodies have been metaphors for nationhood, commodities in the market, and sites of ideological contention, and have been essential for feminist theorists in particular, as connected to and reformulating traditional conceptions of gender, sexuality, subjectivity, and power. The body is also an important cornerstone for discussions surrounding life writing by women. As Smith and Watson suggest, "subjectivity is impossible unless the subject recognizes her location in the materiality of an ever-present body" (2013: 38). In the context of incarceration and writing that emerges from within the material conditions of incarceration, forces both disciplinary and extrajudicial regulate, mark, and attempt to shape the bodies of those incarcerated. These practices, combined with the physical environment of the prison where movement is contained and constrained create bodies held captive. Images of bodily confinement and the body as spectacle abound in prison narratives of women. In this research paper, I aim to make this my primary object of analysis with reference to Minakshi Sen's *Jeler Bhitor Jel* (1994).

In 1970, Minakshi Sen was arrested on false charges by the police in relation to the Naxal uprising. She was tortured and detained for a long time without trial. After her release in 1977, she completed her post-graduation in psychology, began writing seriously in the late seventies and a large part of her prison memories was serialized in *Spandan*, a literary magazine edited by her husband. Later in 1994, she published a compiled version of her prison memoir *Jeler Bhitor Jel* (Jail Within a Jail) in Bengali. *Jeler Bhitor Jel* is episodic in nature, and like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, the narrative is told from the first-person point of view, but each chapter constitutes the narrative rendering of another inmate's life history. Most of the fellow inmates are victims of multiple marginalizations—along the lines of class, religion, occupations like sex work, mental illness, political affiliation, and illiteracy, among other things. This work hasn't been translated into English yet and I will be using my working translation for this paper.

The paper is divided into three parts and it will primarily look at the body of the prisoner, which is held captive, and its connection with life writing by women. The first titled "The Female Body

and Incarceration” will look at how traditional criminology rooted crime committed by women in their “uniquely perverse female body” (Davies 1999: 57) and how Minakshi Sen’s work demonstrates the effect of this on the lives of other female prisoners, whose bodies and selves were then separated from the larger body politic. In the second section titled “Captive Bodies and Space”, one looks at hierarchical configurations of spaces within the prison along the lines of bodily autonomy, mobility, and the ability to form any kind of community. Here, I specifically discuss the use of a space like the “degree-*ghar* (house)” to confer *sasti* (punishment) and officially dictated *chikitsa* (cure). The final section, “Autobiographical (Dis)Placement”, turns back to the question of self-writing and looks at possible reasons why the autobiographical self recedes from the narrative.

II. The Female Body and Incarceration

Bodily autonomy and mobility are important topics for prison writing. Sen’s work is replete with descriptions of their living spaces, inspections, diet, physical abuse, and medical treatment—all accounts of details of these living bodies held in captivity. *Jeler Bhitor Jel* describes how the very initiation into prison life occurs when the female prisoner is being received or “processed” through the institution. It is a time in which their physical bodies become the object of intense scrutiny, and careful procedures are administered to ensure that the individual is contained through the dispossession of any personal artifacts. Everything is accounted for, they are issued clothing and then examined extensively through inspections that occur at the level of the body. These include procedures like strip search and cavity search. On a larger level, this focus on the body is indicative of what I think Sen highlights throughout—a conception of the female prisoner as outside of the larger society, and the body politic. I would argue that their deviance is embodied. In the first chapter of the book, Asgari Begum, the inmate who is the central focus of this chapter is an N.C.L—a non-criminal lunatic. The chapter begins with the description of her body using the graphic vocabulary of a spectacle:

Two bamboo sticks were kept crosswise. And in the middle, hanging horizontally is the skeleton of a dead human. With a strong rope, the body is tightly swaddled to the bamboo sticks. And that skeletal body is being carried by two other skeleton-like bodies... The dead body is a woman. For quite some time before her death, her bones-flesh-skin had already merged into one. A bone-cage covered by a thin layer of skin. That is, a skeleton... This woman was known as Asgari Begum in a jailhouse in an Indian metropolis in the twentieth century... Asgari. Asgari Begum. A lunatic inmate. A lunatic, hence an inmate. Non-criminal lunatic. Locked up, because she was insane. (Sen 1994: 14)

As her dead body is denuded of flesh and mass, the narrative too chooses to first strip her of any identity and describe her graphically as a nameless dead body. Then the narrator-subject tells us about her name—Asgari Begum. But even this name is immediately situated within the context of the twentieth-century jailhouse in an Indian metropolis. Because the narrator-subject did not encounter Asgari outside the confines of prison, she does not attempt to fictionalize her pre-prison life. Instead, her identity emerges as something that was both constructed and systematically attacked by the institution of the prison. Asgari Begum, the prisoner, is constructed as an outsider to the larger society and the body politic, in life and death. This is an active choice the narrator-subject makes as later she chooses to fictionally imagine a conversation between the two men carrying her—an event to which she as a prisoner could not have access.

To contextualize this event, one needs to briefly discuss traditional criminology and its attitude towards women. In the essay “The Sex of Crime and Punishment” (1999), Suzanne Davies and Sandy Cook look at the work *The Female Offender* by Prof. Cæsar Lombroso and William Ferrero published in 1898 in this regard. Although their work is often considered dated now, I find it relevant to recall some of its premises rooted in biological essentialism as an explanation of women’s criminality. The work attributes every form of crime committed by women as a depiction of a “uniquely perverse female body and temperament” (Davies 1999: 57). It argues that “female criminals were biologically distinct from noncriminal women and occupy, like male criminals, a lower

place on the evolutionary scale.” These women are described as more masculine than feminine, “devoid of maternal and religious feelings, more dangerous than men, and excessively erotic.” The born female criminal was thus condemned as the “ultimate embodiment of wickedness” (Davies 1999: 57). Furthermore, traditional criminology rendered women as captives of their bodies, with their condemnation “inextricably linked to their transgression of sexed and gendered norms that frame everyday life” (Davies 1999: 53,62).

Women’s bodies and sexual desires are often subjected to control and surveillance by various discourses in everyday life. The female offender’s body must further be displaced from society and named dangerous. Sen’s work makes a case for how female offenders were both stripped of their femininity and humanity while simultaneously being trapped by their bodily specificity. For example, another chapter of her work focuses on Khiroda, who resided in a cell adjacent to Asgari. While Asgari was a non-criminal lunatic, Khiroda was designated as C.L.— criminal lunatic. She was never tried in court because of her status as a lunatic and resided in the “*pagala garade*” (insane asylum or madhouse). The narrator-subject takes a satirical tone to describe her living conditions:

By court order, Khiroda was in jail for her treatment. One would think that leaving an insane person with their hands and feet in iron handcups, shackled to the iron cell walls covered in their own shit and urine had been discovered as an appropriate method of ‘shock therapy’ to cure them. This was the most prevalent method for treating lunatic inmates. Some warders would take great pride in saying: ‘Girls you won’t understand, many are cured of their madness because we keep them this way. If we had been too lovey-dovey, they would have never been cured’. They of course never even mention the little special governmental provisions ascribed to them by the doctors— Why is it that most of the provisions and medicines accorded to the insane by the doctor’s prescription, were smuggled out of jail? (Sen 1994: 60)

Sen describes elsewhere that Khiroda would stay completely naked in her damp cell, through scorching summers and chilly winters. I think the emphasis on her bodily subjection is quite important because it further highlights how female prisoners are stripped of their femininity along with their humanity, and the very physicality of the body becomes a powerful resource for those who desire to violate, humiliate and shame.

While in the general discourse much is made of women’s bodies and modesty and chastity and how bodies must be regulated and hidden, in the prison these rules are suspended not necessarily by law but by the metanarrative of the prison itself. So the law might not state that these two categories of prisoners— non-criminal lunatics and criminal lunatics should not have access to clothes, healthcare, and the basic human dignity of proper hygiene, but keeping them in the prison automatically displaces them from the rest of womanhood and body politic. And this stripping of dignity, clothes, and even human flesh through starvation and degradation is seen as normal and acceptable according to the warders. Moreover, what little provision is available is constantly prey to corruption. Since their deviance is perceived as embodied in their flesh, their bodies are seen as outside of what might be considered “natural” bodies. This includes conceptions of femininity, motherhood, and even religiosity.

Another prisoner, Soofia Mastaan is introduced to the reader as the third category of women who occupy the prison, specifically the *pagalbari*. She is neither a criminal lunatic like Khiroda, nor a non-criminal lunatic like Asgari, but ends up in the madhouse as retribution at the hands of the matron. As a Muslim inmate, she is entitled to a certain diet during Ramzan which she is repeatedly denied. Her demands are met with *kataksha* (disparaging remarks) regarding the keeping of *rozah* by thieves and robbers (Sen 1994: 350). Even though she is neither a thief nor a robber, but is in jail without trial for a passport violation, what the matron’s comment reflects is that *The Female Offender* might be a dated document in the academic field, but the assumptions regarding the body of the female captive being devoid of religious feelings is still pervasive.

The conception of the female criminal as devoid of “natural” maternal impulses is also reflected in another chapter that focuses on the inmate Meera. As a non-criminal lunatic, Meera had wandered

out of her house in a manic state and had been arrested and kept in jail for two days. After court proceedings, she was sent to the insane ward where it was discovered that she had become pregnant. According to her father, Meera had been raped in police custody but this claim could not be verified by Meera because of her mental state. What follows is a shocking description of how the law made no provisions for the basic sustenance of her child:

According to the law, Meera's infant son wasn't entitled to any food or milk... Meera was a non-criminal lunatic inmate. Her name was on a court warrant. But no warrant was issued in the name of her infant son. That son was born in the prison. The court may have issued the order that kept her mother in jail without her having committed any crime, but it could not do anything for her son. After all, he wasn't mad, hadn't married for love, hadn't been raped, hadn't been involved in politics or protest, or been arrested because of any other offense. Unless such things had happened, how can a non-criminal individual be kept in jail? Hence her son was a 'non-captive child'. (Sen 1994: 76)

This paragraph is reflective of the narrator-subject's biting satire that she especially uses in the context of the language of the law. The law can allow for a category like the non-criminal lunatic to exist and has full authority to sentence such a person to jail, but it has no such power to make basic provisions for the sustenance of children born within the system. Sen mocks this by creating her term—the “non-captive child”. This paragraph also highlights my earlier point about the female prisoner being trapped by their bodily specificity. The various kinds of crimes that land women in jail—including getting raped or marrying for love—are rooted in their bodies, desires, and autonomy. Furthermore, the graphic description of Meera's milk drying up because of the lack of nutrition and her rape at the hands of police in the first place reflects the nexus of class, gender, and mental illness that repeatedly leaves her and her body completely vulnerable in the hands of the law, while simultaneously stripping her of the socially accepted discourse surrounding women and the fulfillment of their maternal role. Sen's work creates an image of the embodied alienation of the female prisoners from the larger society, the “body” politic, and societal norms of femininity and motherhood.

III. Captive Bodies and Space

Further discussions around incarcerated bodies and captivity necessitate an analysis of space as it is configured in the prison according to Sen's work. In the chapter which focuses on Khiroda, the narrator-subject refers to her as a *nikam⁴a pratibeshi* (a close neighbor) who lived on the first floor while they were situated on the second floor. The narrator-subject says that in the outside world (*bairer jagate*) this difference of one floor might have meant a distance of a few stairs. But in the jail, this distance was much more (30). Space is configured differently in prison, and in this specific situation, the space between the first and second floor signified a difference of a greater degree because Khiroda was a criminal lunatic while the narrator-subject and her friends were political prisoners linked to the Naxal movement. Both kinds of prisoners were subjected to different degrees of oppression and isolation, but more importantly, both were now cut off from rules that governed the “*bairer jagate*” and the body politic. The isolation of the narrator-subject and her fellow prisoners was maintained assiduously with threats of corporal punishments for those who violated these boundaries.

In the context of prison writing, it is important to look at a theorist like Elaine Scarry who has spoken about bodies whose boundaries are more fixed than those who theorize about bodies and their capacity to spill over, break boundaries, to escape the limitations that greet it. In her work, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), Scarry talks about physical torture and its effect on the body and mind. She mentions that the tortured person is continually implicated not just by the torturer, but by the power structure of their holding area. One can apply this in the context of the prison where the prisoner's physical world is also limited to the room, the cell, and its contents, and this world is slowly dissolved through a process in which “the torturer's expanding world-ground depends on a demonstration of the prisoner's absence of world” (1985: 37–41). This aspect is extremely important to Sen's work as the narrative repeatedly focuses on descriptions of the

“degree-*ghar*”—the living space prisoners are often confined to as *sasti* (punishment) but also under the garb of officially dictated *chikitsa* (cure).

In the first chapter, she describes it as “a few sight-less, light-less shack houses established by the British Raj” for special types of inmates (Sen 1994: 15). In another chapter, she compares it to the dark and damp abode of the primeval man (Sen 1994: 69). The degree is the most vividly realized space in Sen’s work. She writes:

These shacks called the degree had no windows. The doors have iron railings... The path for sunlight to enter was completely shut. Darkness accumulated in this room even during the day. The wind paced to and fro before entering here, barely making its way in. The floor becomes wet on its own, it is that damp. The spine shivers with cold. Cut within the room itself is a small drain. Created apparently to carry feces and urine outside. That is to say, to ensure that the inmate doesn’t have to leave this poisonous atmosphere even to attend nature’s call—she can stay here twenty-four seven— even amenity has been arranged for. One can speculate that the British Raj created these cells to punish disobedient prisoners. In the year 1973, these cells were used again for the same purpose. (Sen 1994: 15)

This space and all that it symbolizes, which is the prisoner’s absence of the world was the most frequently used method for torture, punishment, and control. Sometimes this control is exercised by individual agents like cruel warders. Often it is through the colder and more indifferent forces of prison rules, law, and procedural language which is followed without exemptions. The narrative’s focus on two prisoners especially highlights the complex ways in which this degree-*ghar* was utilized within the jail. First, we have Asgari Begum, a non-criminal lunatic who was kept in the degree *ghar* instead of the *pagalbari* because she had contracted tuberculosis, a communicable illness. After inquiries to other warders, the narrator-subject figures out that keeping her in isolation is the only “special consideration” Asgari is afforded because of her illness (Sen 1994: 16). She is denied visits by the doctor, she isn’t provided any kind of special food and as the description of the degree has already stated, her living quarters are unhygienic to the greatest degree. Thus the space of the degree is the officially dictated “*chikitsa*” Asgari is subjected to, not by the individual cruelty of warden masters, but the institutional law of the prison which states that prisoners suffering from communicable diseases must be kept in isolation.

Then comes the aspect of punishment (*sasti*). The narrator-subject describes how Asgari “would crouch all night from cold, but in the morning she would beg the warders to let her sit in the sun. Sitting in the sun gave her such happiness, she believed she would survive only if she could get to sit in the sun.” (Sen 1994: 16). This solitary pleasure of her life is snatched away from Asgari when she makes the mistake of talking to the narrator and her friend who are political prisoners. After this incident, the narrative describes how Asgari was never seen outside. When she appears again on the wash day for one final time, the description echoes the first lines of this book, it is incredibly gruesome and uses dehumanizing language to refer to her body:

Suddenly the entire ward let out a startled scream. As if they were being chased by some kind of a *bibhishika* (a creature of horror)... Searching for the source of the sound reveals the sight of a few girls chasing a skeletal figure. A living skeleton. The skin covers some bones. Long, thin arms stretched towards the sky. Fingers spread. Hair forming three dreadlocks climbing down her shoulders... The skeleton ran unsteadily, but fast. She was completely naked except for a bit of the familiar green cloth tied around her waist. Asgari. Asgari Begum. (Sen 1994: 21)

Elaine Scarry has talked about how the person being tortured is unable to “transcend varied attempts at controlling his or her body particularly since one person’s physical pain has come to be understood as another person’s power” (1985: 37–41). I would like to argue that in Asgari Begum’s case, the narrative demonstrates how the exercise of power results from the prisoner’s pain, but specifically from her bodily containment—one she is unable to transcend.

This is further demonstrated by another prisoner—Nilima. Nilima ends up in prison because she was working as a prostitute and later due to insanity. One day she tried to commit suicide in the jail

but got noticed by other prisoners. As punishment for this act, Nilima is stripped of her clothes, denied food and water, and sent to the degree-ghar during January. This chapter is full of questions from the narrator-subject: "How is it possible for someone to strip a girl of all clothing and leave her naked in the cold?". The answer is: "It is possible. In this jail everything is possible. The name for this is *sasti*... cold, *lajja* (shame), dishonor — all these feelings weigh heavily on this girl's heart. But throwing her in a degree-ghar at the height of winter after stripping her of her clothes, this is the civil procedure for punishment in this civilized country's jailhouse" (Sen 1994: 164). The narrator further comments that under the rules of this civil country's jailhouse, Nilima has the right to die of pneumonia from the cold but not through suicide. Pneumonia would imply a natural death, suicide would mean the breaking of rules. Within the jail, Nilima's body is the property of the state and she cannot break such rules. By the end of this chapter, the narrator only leaves one question unanswered: "Was there really no other way of preventing another attempt at suicide, some way that did not strip her of clothes, blankets, and food?" (Sen 1994: 164)

This work titled *Jeler Bhitor Jel* which translates as jail within a jail aptly demonstrates the hierarchical configurations of spaces along the lines of bodily autonomy and mobility; at various points in the work, the narrator-subject describes different spaces as the jail within the jail including the female ward, the *pagalbari*, the degree-ghar. The narrator-subject describes how everyone is assigned a diet by doctors within the prison—the usual fare for prisoners in the general ward, a special diet for prisoners in the *pagalbari*, a *rozah* diet for those keeping the fast, and dietary amendments for those suffering from chronic illnesses like pneumonia, tuberculosis, etc. These special food items like milk, fish, butter, boiled vegetables, or fruits however never reach those it is intended for. Instead, they are redirected to the hospital where it is redistributed amongst warders and sold to the outside world for profit.

The only exceptions to this rule are the cell-*bari* and division-*bari* because of the composition of their inmates. The narrator says "the reason is that in these two spaces reside the educated, aware inmates who possess the capacity of presenting a united front. A calculated decision is made by the warders—to avoid the agitation that might result from denying them the food they are entitled to" (Sen 1994: 356). The intersection of identity markers like literacy, political awareness, and the ability to form a collective allows certain bodies to have inalienable rights. Consecutively the spaces they occupy like the cell-*bari* and division-*bari* get placed higher up in the hierarchy.

Sen's narrative demonstrates how an incarcerated woman is not only placed in an enclosed physical environment where there is less and less freedom to move due to gates, wire, or other deterrents, she is also marked within that environment as someone whose movement is subject to surveillance, and this mobility is a commodity that can then be regulated. Not only does the narrator describe the constant threat of a search; all the referrals, punishment, and corrective cures that can be implemented trade in "the prisoner's absence of world" (1985:37). The narrator-subject's position as a political prisoner associated with the Naxal movement is also included in this dynamic. She is being held captive not only within the female ward but also within her cell which is locked on the outside. The capacity to roam outside is designated as *mukti* (salvation), something she is denied. Fellow prisoners who talk to them are subjected to the harshest kinds of punishment at the hands of other inmates who are in the warder's favor.

III. Autobiographical (Dis)Placement

Finally, I would like to return to the question of self-writing, subjectivity, and bodily specificity and address the issues raised by prison writing in general and Sen's work in particular. The connection commonly made between a subject and the ability to claim movement, understand oneself in relation to the world, and maintain a sense of self accessed through bodily autonomy become problematic when the body in discussion is that of the prisoner. This, I would argue, is one of the reasons for the autobiographical displacement in the text. The autobiographical self in this work recedes to

a great extent, it is a fractured voice that never fully emerges as more than a witness, a commentator, and a chronicler of life inside prison. Her subjectivity is mentioned in very few instances, even though the narrator's rhetorical questions, her voice as the critic, her satire, and her condemnations frame the narrative. It also frames the lives of prisoners as each chapter episodically focuses on the life of a particular inmate.

Often there are huge time jumps in this narrativization, for example, the life of Nilima which is described from her pre-prison experiences to her eventual demise. And one of the ways in which the autobiographical self becomes hard to trace as more than a commentator is the lack of placement in time for the subject-narrator herself. She fictionalizes conversations and narrativizes the lives of fellow inmates, but we as readers do not get a concrete sense of how time passes for her. This one would argue also contributes to the fragmentation of the autobiographical self.

The other reason behind this aesthetic and political choice towards fragmentation is the narrator-subject's position as a political prisoner. In various chapters, other prisoners are subjected to horrific punishment for interacting with her. To cite just one example, the chapter that focuses on Shahnaaz talks about how the simple act of asking after the narrator's well-being has horrific repercussions for this young girl. This happens in the second chapter. I have discussed earlier how the first chapter with Asgari also describes the consequences meted out to her for talking to the narrator-subject. In various instances we see the narrator-subject being forced into the position of a witness and spectator while another prisoner's physical abuse is staged for her.

In the aftermath of this event, the subject-narrator talks about her own subjectivity for the first time: "I realized that the harsh realities of this jail are being engraved on the landscape of my nineteen-year-old heart... They leave a mark that never fades away" (Sen 1994: 43). Instances like this where the narrator-subject describes the impact of prison life on her selfhood are few and far between in the work. She instead acts as a witness to the brutalities within the prison, a commentator who uses biting satire to describe prison laws and language, an author who fictionalizes many events and conversations that she as a prisoner could not have access to, and finally, a journalist/investigator who questions matrons, warders, and inmates to uncover details like corruption and mismanagement.

The narrator-subject seems to have an awareness of her privilege as a member of the literate community. This could be another reason why she recedes from the narrative, using her literacy to document the subaltern voices of other prisoners instead. She uses her literacy instead to frame the work for the readers. Chapter titles are often followed by epigraphs from other fictional works. For instance "... and it's a mad, mad, mad, world" (Sen 1994: 37) is the epigraph in Chapter Two, quoted in English in the Bengali original, referring to a 1963 American comedy film produced and directed by Stanley Kramer. The epigraph in chapter five is a quote from Tagore's poem titled "*BrahmaG^a*": "*janmechila bhartrrhina jabalara kore*". The line roughly translates as: "you were born in the lap of husband-less Jabala". The context of this line is as follows: Jabala was a prostitute who did not have a husband. When her son, Satyakam, asks her about his father's identity, this is the reply she gives. The chapter's focus is on Meera, the lunatic inmate who is raped in police custody and struggles to feed her child in prison. I would argue that by frequently using such epigraphs from fictional works to echo and in some ways frame the lives of the prisoners she is describing, Sen's narrative creates a subject-narrator who has literary sensibilities and actively chooses to employ these skills to narrate the lives of others rather than herself.

IV. Conclusion

In prison, the intrusion onto the sense of selfhood, autonomy, and physical and emotional being is not just another relation in discourse that all people are subjected to. It is direct and geared specifically at disabling the entire notion of willful, independent selves. *Jeler Bhitor Jel* (1994) as a work of prison writing emerges from these spaces which engage in the "institutionalized killing of the subject" (Rodríguez 2006: 85). The article has argued that *Jeler Bhitor Jel* demonstrates the difficulty of

maintaining a sense of self in the face of receding bodily autonomy through narrative strategies that are both aesthetic and political. The effacement of the speaking subject, that is the voice of the political prisoner to represent the 'Other' categories of prisoners is one such choice. One of the ways in which the autobiographical self becomes hard to trace in this work is the lack of placement in time for the subject-narrator. The autobiographical self in *Jeler Bhitor Jel* is the commentator, critic, witness, and author who narrativizes the lives of fellow inmates, revealing the nature of embodied deviance ascribed to female inmates. She also reveals how space is used within the prison ecosystem to create a hierarchy between types of prisoners. Sen's narrative strategies highlight that within the prison, the bodies of incarcerated women are continuously shaped by restrictions concerning their movement; everything from diseases, political affiliations, occupation before coming to prison can have an impact on reducing mobility, bodily autonomy, and their ability to form any kind of community.

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Of Truth and Telling in Book Form: The Two-part Autobiographical Work of Maitreyi Pushpa

SHUBHRA DUBEY

Abstract: Hindi literary sphere has had a thriving periodical culture, a substantial part of which has been the site for women's expression, shaping and shaped by its participatory framework. Standing in stark contrast to their enormous output in hindi periodicals is the conspicuously small number of books by women, and even fewer autobiographies. In absence of a prolific women's autobiographical tradition outside of the periodicals, the few that exist stand out. With an eye to this arid landscape of independent autobiographies by women in the hindi sphere, this paper reads Maitreyi Pushpa's two-part autobiographical undertaking, *Kasturi Kundal Basai* (2002) and *Gudiya Bheetar Gudiya* (2008). Where one positions itself as a novelized autobiography, an intergenerational tale of two women—the author and her mother; the other conforms self-consciously to conventional norms of autobiographical writing to talk about her life post marriage and managing writerly aspirations along with prescribed roles of wife and mother. Pushpa's express commitment to *streevimarsh* (feminist discourse in the hindi sphere) is invoked multiple times in the two books to reflect on *streejeevan* (life of a woman), positioning the autobiographical act as an *instance* and example of a gendered life opened up to public eye. The paper reads into the connection between narratorial self-making and the material culture of the hindi public sphere by reading into the citational style or what has elsewhere been referred to as the implementation of a referential aesthetic to distil some insights on the significance of the book-form to establish intimacy as a site for the presentation of the self in its myriad, changing forms.

Keywords: Hindi public sphere, novel, autobiography, Maitreyi Pushpa

At the end of her autobiography *Gudiya Bheetar Gudiya* (2008) published six years after *Kasturi Kundal Basai* her first autobiographical work (2002) Maitreyi Pushpa revisits the interaction that led her to write about her life. It began when she received a request to write an autobiographical feature for a special issue on women writers in the hindi literary magazine *Hans*.

“...I became restless. As if I began to lose interest in my own life, I was in two minds and starting to grow tired of it. If I were to write, where would I start? What should I focus on and at the cost of which bit? What all do I stand to lose if I write it? To not write at all felt just as bad. Do I want more trouble than I have already got into? Will the response be worse than what I have received for (my) novels?” (324)

The lines are an expression of the strong desire to write about the self in spite of perceived doubts and uncertainty surrounding such an exercise and the wariness to invite scrutiny and censure from the wider public in the relatively sparse landscape of women's self-writing endeavors in Hindi. Pushpa wrote a novelized autobiography, a feminist bildungsroman. Notably for our purpose, the impetus for this exercise notably came from a periodical.

The influence of periodical culture on the literary and cultural conversation of the hindi sphere can hardly be overstated. In this case, an exercise of self-writing is mediated by a special issue

dedicated to *streevimarsh* (literally discourse on women or feminist discourse), framing the conversation on life stories of women. In her latest on print culture of North India of the 50s-70s, Orsini (2022) borrows Amit Chaudhuri's term 'literary activism' to classify the work of editors who champion "on behalf of literature ... new writers and encourage readers' tastes, but also a constant critical interrogation on the value and function of literature" (1). Indeed, the progressive outlook of a literary magazine where Pushpa was invited to submit her life-story may be seen as an instance of the coexistence of this moral, ethical and political commitment of the print culture coexisting alongside and overlapping with concerns of readability and consumption in post-liberalisation India. Pushpa is taken aback by the interest of the editors in her lifestory and asks "whatever can I write that will be useful for your issue and will be inspirational for the readers?" (324) The other life stories invited for this issue that Pushpa lists are those of Mary Roy (mother of Arundhati Roy) and Nabanita Deb Sen that were translated to hindi from English, a fairly common practice where excerpts of auto/biographies from regional as well global languages are translated for public consumption.

The vibrant print-periodical culture of hindi sphere has been studied closely by scholars to understand its role in shaping everyday practices and interiority of women. Shobna Nijhawan in her brilliant introduction to women's periodicals at the turn of twentieth century argues for the periodical as a genre with a participatory framework. Aakriti Madhwani in her study of the rise of commercial print magazines post independence studies the consumption practices of the burgeoning middle class by looking at how the commercial magazines catered to the biggest possible reading public "possessing something for everyone in the family, promoting segmented consumption with a focus on each member's reading desires, with something on offer for each individual, regardless of age, gender, or marital status." (3) These commercial ventures were one of the earliest sites where female public self-expression was encouraged. In many cases these magazines were helmed by public figures commanding relative influence, who mediated these emergent voices from the public and made editorial decisions about the style and layout to cater to the widest possible readership of subject-citizens (Nijhawan 1). The potential of this relatively new medium of public engagement has unfolded as a significant chapter in hindi literary sphere. Overtime these commercial as well as literary print magazines became dominant sites of public conversation on literary and artistic experiments, morality and citizenship. Orsini's latest work on the 1950s-1970s magazine archive elaborates on the contribution of these magazines on public discourses.

Pushpa's autobiographies share an extended field of reference with hindi print culture, specifically newspapers and magazines. Given the reach and influence of the latter, this is hardly surprising. From the moment of inception of the project to the end of volume two, Pushpa's life-history is deeply immersed in magazines and the vast world of print. How can we theorise the autobiographical project of women in hindi sphere, rare as they are, in light of the dynamic forces that influence this process? This paper argues for a fresh look at the autobiographical texts in the book form as ways of public contestations, jostling for visibility as well as self-ability. It may be said that the will to tell one's own story has multiple loci of impetus, one being to set the record straight so to speak.

A well-known public figure in North India for her vocal critique of institutions of marriage, motherhood and family, Maitreyi Pushpa has retained her initial reputation of a woman writer deeply invested in the rural and small town, rurban contexts of north India. She has a torrid online presence and posts round-the clock on cultural and social issues pertaining to lives of women, claiming a very visible space in the public imaginary. She was born in 1944 in Jhansi and spent a considerable part of her formative years up until her twenties in the Bundelkhand region of central and north India where the "folk and literary heritage of this historical region ... as well as the rural and then the small-town background" (Browarczyk 222) shaped her consciousness in decisive ways. She is most known for writing strong rural women characters with rich ethnographic detail.

Kasturi and *Gudiya* make differing generic claims. While *Kasturi* is a novelized autobiography, *Gudiya* following six years later calls itself an autobiography. It goes a step further and revises the

claim of the first book as novel by calling itself the second part of the two-volume autobiography. Stylistically the first book makes tentative aesthetic claims and argues for fiction as a narratorial need for a cohesive and readable story. The structuring principle of the feminist bildungsroman weaves the story of Maitreyi as one of liberation from the private, “Ghar ka kaaragar toot raha hai” says the last line of the novel (meaning, the walls of the home breaking away). These lines appear in the context of Maitreyi giving birth to the first of her three daughters. As the reader will learn in volume two, the ending is heavy with irony. Pushpa gave up writing to devote herself to her role of a wife and mother.

Gudiya on the other hand is direct in its address, eschewing creative liberties, ambivalence and irony put to innovative usages in first part. The prose reflects a purposiveness and makes express claims to truth-telling. From bildungsroman to autobiography, the project of self narration moves from tropes of self-discovery to self-declaration: “we leave out things out of modestly (*lihaaz*) or choose to present a select few leaving out others” (back cover). The packaging of both books is that of significant events, as “explosion(s)” (*Maitreyi ka ek aur dhamaka*, back cover, *Gudiya*) setting readerly expectations in line with the public image Pushpa has acquired over years. Direct and bold, the commitments of coherence and narrative integrity expressed in *Kasturi*, however tentative, undergo slight modification in *Gudiya*. By narrative integrity one refers not just to “harmony of proportion or beauty of form as principles of narrative composition but to the coherence and depth of one’s ethical commitments, as evidenced by the shape of one’s life” (Freeman and Brockmeier, 76). In *Gudiya*, formal concerns recede into the background in favour of presenting an ethically cogent subject, with an express commitment to *streevimarsh* at the intersection of caste and class configurations. Between aesthetic and ethics, the autobiographical subject relies on stylized citational practices to depict the ebb and flow of her public life. As forms of life-narratives both the books make truth claims, while it is *Gudiya* that makes explicit reference that it exists in an alternate space to the glittering world of controversies and engineered news in magazines and newspapers. The paper reads into the importance of life-stories in book form beyond obvious formal considerations. It argues that the permanence offered by the book-form could be read in contrast to the forever unfolding, ephemeral world of the magazines and newspapers; the book is a symbolic space that liberates the individual from and contests the mediatory demands of editorialising voices of magazines. The narrative strategy of the second book, with its use of dialogue and extensive citations to address gossip and scandal about the writer’s sexual and marital relations in circulation in print journalism and periodicals, point to the books as existing in centrifugal relation to the external world. The paper reflects on the narrative inconsistencies and incongruities of this two-part undertaking as an opportunity to better understand the (gendered) anxieties of self-presentation in the hindi-sphere and the role of the book-form to make explicit claims of self-affirmation as it actively interacts with, and is constituted within a larger print economy.

Subject in/to the Market

The paratextual frame of *Kasturi*¹ enveloping the narrative invokes the fact-fiction dichotomy, only to underline the willful blurring of the distinction by the author. “Every novel is an autobiography; every autobiography is a novel. Fiction is the common thread that runs through both...” (backcover) places fiction at the heart of all literary undertaking. It establishes the autobiographical project as an imaginative art: creative and liberating, that defies neat generic compartmentalisations. The triumphant poststructuralist project in the West that firmly demonstrated once and for all, the undecidability of the distinction between fact and fiction (Eakin, 29) seems at odds with the humble offering of *Kasturi* with the prefatory question, “Should I call this a history or an autobiography?”² (Preface). Citing lack of adequate communication between the two central characters of mother and daughter as well as paucity of eyewitness accounts and documentary evidence, the writer claims fiction to be a narratorial need, endemic to the autobiographical undertaking. From its beginning the text places truth, narrative coherence and readability as central concerns to the undertaking,

where the autobiographical self is referential, locating the formation of personhood in a generational continuum of mother-daughter conflict over individual worldviews played out against the background of the nation-building process in post-independence India.

Kasturi is an important member of Mahila Mangal, one of the earliest post-independence women's organizations for rural reconstruction, with the aim to transform the lives of women. Kasturi's toughness is a consequence of immense domestic responsibilities due to early widowhood and exposure to activist discourses and gendered socialization emphasizing self-effacement, abnegation and denial. In stark contrast is Maitreyi's youthful ideal of romance and sexual fantasies fueled by her clandestine consumption of romantic poems in hindi magazines. For Maitreyi, self-fulfillment is intimately tied to companionship and marriage. Monika Browarczyk points to the use of "the third-person narration; of focusing on steady, almost entirely chronological development of the plotline; and of including long passages with dialogues and monologues by various characters" (223) as some of the narrative strategies employed to present the story of self-realization. Moreover, the narration flits between third and first-person narration. The reconstruction of mother's lifestory refers to Maitreyi in third person. "The girl slid closer to her mother apologized (66), "Maitreyi was daydreaming" (96). Over the course of the novel, specifically from chapter 4 entitled, "tum pinjra mai suanaa tora" (meaning I am a bird in your cage) narrative focus shifts from mother to the daughter, the narratorial voice comes to inhabit first person voice more frequently, while focalizing on the interiority of the daughter "I have started thinking like you mother" (133). The point of view shifts rapidly and is populated with the vocabulary of social critique of motherly sacrifice and lack post-marriage.³

Even as the early years make for a fascinating reading, rich as they are in narrative technique and symbolism, they signal a complex relationship with truth. When Maitreyi expresses her wish to marry immediately after finishing college instead of becoming independent like Kasturi had hoped, the result is shock. "They say that the second generation often treats the first with utmost brutality. Then why do they say that daughters resemble their mothers?" (136). The running trope is of a rebellious daughter of a rebel mother. The self is honed and shaped in a polemical relation to, observation of and contrast to that of the mother, while the latter half of the text, post marriage is an exercise in self-correction; done in gratitude of the mother. The mother-daughter dynamic runs parallel to the account of Maitreyi's entry into the public sphere. First important moment is when she publishes a poem "The women of the locality" (*baare ki auratein*) inspired by the casteist treatment of waste workers and domestic labourers in her rural neighbourhood. The mother and daughter are made to pay by being turned out of the house (176-78). The text also contains occasional references and quotations from writers that influenced her reading and overall literary style.

The narrative cites from various sources to trace the development of writerly consciousness from published to unpublished works of Pushpa to secondary and tertiary writings that shaped her literary sensibility, including quotations from decretal notes and love letters received in college (122): "She kept the letter in between the pages of the Gita, to be read at night time. Is it possible to sleep after receiving the first love letter? I lay there, wrapped in the honey of his words, reading the words out loud, "Deeper I fall, into the intoxicating scent of your love..." ("Gahare utri chali ja rahi thi, tumhare hriday ki madhu bhawna...")

The range of citational practices from publically available literature to private papers contributes to the rich literary texture of the narrative, where songs and slogans from precolonial India find mention along with instances of formalized, published writing. *Kasturi* relies on such varied and various literary textures to compose a bildungsroman, show the formation of temperament, the shaping of a personality, what Roy Pascal calls the *acquisition of an outlook* (105). Needless to say, the citational style does not preclude or present this practice as being in contrast to fictional tropes and stylisation in the text rather, it seamlessly weaves the two into one narrative whole.

Gudiya is generically marked as an autobiography and makes explicit prosaic demands on the reader. The narrative builds on the image of a passionate, feisty woman who picks up writing as a

profession well after her own daughters are grown up. The citational landscape here too reconstructs dialogues, quotes poetic lines from films and magazines (21, 87, 134, 135)⁴. Lines from folk songs and couplets (55, 98)⁵ to write about the linguistic and social texture of the world that the subject inhabits. In fact the deeper one travels into Pushpa's world, the referencing and citations become more intense, the authorial intent to define the meaning of these quotes more confrontational. The uncertainty and self-doubt, along with errors of judgement and one's own perspective is presented with a steady gaze of self-scrutiny than in the first book, as she singlehandedly negotiates a strict husband, motherhood and travel in the big city of Delhi looking for opportunities to publish her writings. Interestingly, the citational practice expands to include writings from within personal poems, letters, diary entries by self (54, 163, 170, 171) and by others (40)⁶. In one instance, the writer includes a diary entry of one of her daughters (162) to piece together the event and feelings of the time she picked up the writing again after giving it up to become a mother to her three daughters. To this effect the citational practice as well as novelization try to diffuse any emergent binaries of fact and fiction it invokes in the preface.

The prefatory address of *Gudiya* contains information about Maitreyi's mother which exceeded the narrative frame of the previous book, informing the readers of Kasturi and grassroots activists like her in organisations such as Mahila Mangal which were disbanded and were not rehabilitated by the government and struggled to eek out a living. In addition the preface informs, that the writer has felt compelled to write the book in answer to reader's query about her literary journey. As a public figure of note, *Gudiya* sees Pushpa engaging closely with the writerly process and fame as emergent themes. The paratextual apparatus of part 2 reiterates the author's commitment to truth-telling. The text is framed within the vocabulary of a public statement to put to rest some of the rumours and speculations in the public domain that were a result of her first volume. "Maitreyi has acknowledged her relationship with Dr. Siddharth (her husband) and Rajendra Yadav (writer, pioneer of the *nayi kahaani* movement, editor of literary journal *Hans*) with a boldness bordering on self-destruction".⁷ (parenthetical notes are mine) The dichotomy of fact and fiction is stirred just once here, only to draw a direct parallel between one of Pushpa's famous characters and her life, "meet the Alma Kabutari of literature" (back cover). To invoke one of her most famous literary creations is to invite an interpretive parallel with a woman from a tribal community living on the fringes of society. The blurb positions the autobiographical subject as a literary minority existing at the fringes of an elitist and exclusionary hindi literary sphere. The next section elaborates on citational practices used to advance this worldview.

Self as/in Revision

Considering the claim that any autobiographical fiction makes on truth, the two books together, are one of a kind literary experimentation in autobiographical writing, recasting existing generic frames of the novel and tell-all autobiography to engage with the "truth" of the self. Where *Kasturi* outlines innovation in storytelling as its claim to public eye, book two outlines *an imperative to truth* as the organizing principle to tell this story.

Monika Browarczyk's essay (2018) on the phenomenon of two-volumes of autobiographical writing by hindi women writers observes that the second volume is improvisational and revisionary in intent since it revises frames established in the first volume. The two prefatory addresses address concerns of narrative inconsistency, incongruous selves as if to say, the writer *wanted* to write the first part while she was *compelled* to write the second one due to a constellation of factors involving her rising stature in public domain. This felt need to repeatedly justify one's claim to write of oneself has been read by Browarczyk as "a device plausibly employed to disown and distance oneself from the 'immodest' impulse of self-promotion". (214)

The previous section focused on Pushpa's narrative technique on *Kasturi*, the referential aesthetic involving quotes from published and unpublished works as a narrative practice to develop her self-

image as, to quote Smith and Watson, “active agent in public life” (4). These episodes in *Kasturi* illustrate how this vibrant space was a site of everyday self-making and contributed to the expansion of her writerly consciousness, from where she could distil her vision of her role as a writer (176). Naturally therefore in her intimate view of her life as a writer, her interactions and overall experience with the print establishment are important part of the narrative. She got a push-start from regional newspapers such as *Dainik Jagriti*, *Saaptahik Hindustan*, then middle brow (names of some magazines and editors have been withheld for instance on 169, 179, 198) and the glittering high-brow corners (*Hans*, *Vasudha*, *Pahal*) as her writing gained traction. A major part of the second volume details many encounters ranging from meeting known faces, to sexual harassment in the higher echelons of the hindi print establishment. While the commitment to public life is constantly iterated, the narrative carries long polemical prose on the costs of speaking up. In the wake of the publication of *Kasturi*, magazines ran articles exclusively focusing on passages about marriage and sex with salacious titles like “Maitreyi Pushpa’s sex life” (331). Her husband who has thus far not read *Kasturi* comes to read about his representation as a sexually passive, unimaginative man in a review somewhere. Perhaps this why in an interview she mentions that the ‘courage’ to write in the book-form came much later.⁸ The conversations held in private are reconstructed to illustrate the contestations and protests of the private against the circulation and dispersal of private experiences and form the afterlife of autobiographical undertakings by women and bolster the authorial intent to contest these claims in public. The revisionary intent of the second volume is in part informed by the anxiety to present an ethically cogent self and to comment on the experience of writing the first volume in order to position the self in relation to the public word and world. The autobiographical form becomes the site for grappling with multiple discourses in print and multimedia around her private life. Thus the autobiographical undertaking places itself in a relational tension with other genres of print culture.

The autobiographical subject of the second volume while taking a contingent and revisionary narrative approach, instrumentalises the book-form of self-writing in order to memorialise her response to the activity surrounding her in the print-public field. The anxieties that inform such redressal and revision bear more focus. The relational, tentative self, presented in the first volume makes way for a confident, self-assured first person narrator who is aware of her social standing, and confident of her linguistic prowess to upend the slander and gossip in circulation about her. The narrative details the destabilising impact of the slander in circulation, framed within affective vocabulary of hurt and outrage, to be preserved in language. This is done via a selection of anecdotal evidence to elaborate upon and illustrate “the truth”, bolstered by elaborate citations including letters and conversations with friends and family. What follows is a public act of avowal and disavowal where the narrating subject redefines and reconstitutes one’s social and professional circle against the hindi literati to clearly state who one’s true friends are (“why did the interviewees not speak to Krishna Sobti, Anamika and Raji Seth?... what was the true intent behind Kshama Sharma’s words?” 336). The anxiety of belonging in this sphere, of losing social standing in public eye informs aesthetic and ethical concerns of the text. The re-constitution of this self happens in a contingent, loose fashion that relies on the autonomous book-form as an object to emancipate from the shifting sands of periodicals and newspapers.

Traditionally, the autobiographical iteration has been read as a medium of articulating difference, a practice involving individuating and delineating self from others. The autobiography delves into individual concerns that exceed the generalising claims of social theory. Curiously, Pushpa presents her life story as an instance of and as an example of *streejeevan* a rhetorical strategy and a political claim for the study of the collective lot through the instance of the singular story. Apart from husband Siddharth and writer Yogendra Yadav, the narrative landscape of both the text is filled with women. Pushpa identifies the goal of this autobiographical articulation within a vocabulary of learning and inspiration for the reading public (*upyogi* and *prernadaayak*, 324). To quote Eakin,

“implicit in the exercise of the autobiographical act the idea that it supplements the life that has been lived, a sense that life as it was requires the improvement of art—the closure, the coherence, the permanence conferred by the stamp of form” (51). The book-form thus, is a space Pushpa carves out as an agential being in public eye, a teleological inevitability for the female-writer in her journey to self-realisation. The last few chapters of volume two consist of a variety of devices to engage this world of gossip and scandal. This includes forms of informal citation by readership comprising in large parts of women, teachers and students of hindi literature, to legitimise her claim as an important voice in the public sphere.

“Other women too live like this? Since I started publishing the novels, followed by *Kasturi* (and) I have received letters saying ‘Maitreyiji tell us how you sustain your marriage? Maitreyi *didi* reading about the realities you present in your novels has wrecked me. Maitreyi *di* they taunt me saying that reading your books has made me difficult. Dear, your autobiography has arrived, more compelling than your novels. . . Maitreyiji I have read *Kasturi* many times, each time I have caught myself thinking I should also pluck up the courage to speak about ourselves, our bodies that are imprisoned by domestic norms and the dominant social codes.” (Gudiya, 330)

The self is constituted and reconstituted in book-form and the intimacy with readers is sustained beyond the ephemeral forms of the magazine because of it. Even as newspaper and magazines were the primary platforms that launched the subject into the psycho-physical space of the public, the book form is written about as endemic to the self-realisation of an ethically, morally conscious subject in public eye. Pushpa makes reference to a growing intimacy with her readers after she started writing long fiction. reclaiming of book-form. Even as magazines and periodicals remain essential to generating excitement around the writer’s work the book form is important to sustain these intimacies with one’s readers. (*Gudiya* 329–330)

Autobiography as Public Contestation

The practices of fictionalization and citation are seamlessly incorporated into the generic performance of truth-telling. At the same time, the book form does not just supplement information about what goes on in the backrooms of haloed publishing houses, as sites of “controversies and created news” (Orsini 2002, 57) and scandal. Pushpa’s second volume is introduced as an important *event* (or as the blurb calls it an explosion, *dhamaka* infact). The polemical charge of the work present a strong counter-narrative of the hindi literary establishments.

The public declaration of socio-cultural commitments in *Gudiya* are framed as an instance of *streejeewan*, is a rhetorical exercise in claiming for the self a vantage point and an exemplar of the female ‘lot’. Present here is a desire to assert “the distinctiveness and continuity of subjectivity” (Eakin 52). The task of *representing women* through the narration of one’s story is fraught with the problematics of a dominant caste woman writing prolifically on the lives of women across caste barriers in the hinterlands of north India. Being one of few such voices of her time, Pushpa’s oeuvre maybe seen as contributing to local histories of feminist thought working at the intersections of caste and class.

Pushpa’s possessive utterance of “*my book*” (332, emphasis mine) must be read as an extension of self-making through the process of autobiographical practice by engaging directly with factors contributing to her public image. As mentioned earlier, the memorialization and permanence of this specific literary endeavour in the form of a book has to be understood in relation to the ephemerality of the periodical as an instance of the interactive mode of self-making across genres and forms in print. The history of print culture namely periodicals and newspapers alerts us to the varied and various impulses that sustained the reading-writing activities of the hindi sphere. Amidst the literary activism⁹ of the high and middle brow magazines (Orsini 2), there exists the ambivalent speculative zone of loose talk. The anxieties of coping with and responding to the huge amount of conversation being generated about Pushpa is then tackled by the practice of autobiography writing. Needless to say, the attempt to draw a continuum between the first and second books is fraught with inconsisten-

cies and contradictions as elaborated earlier. And yet, the desire to take possession of one's life narrative is writ large across the two books, coupled with the desire to intervene in the social. "No matter how enjoyable a read, if it does not influence the life of others, what is the use?"¹⁰ The motivation for reading the autobiography have a lot in common with the desire to write it, both bound by individual utility and aspiration.

Tracing the story of mother from pre-independence India to the brutal clampdown on the organizations like Mahila Mangal, to the change in the author's fortunes as a writer of repute in hindi sphere and the gendered conditions that shaped it, *Kasturi Kundal Basai* and *Gudiya Bheetar Gudiya* locate the story of the individual(s) within social and political change. From a female bildungsroman in *Kasturi* to the autobiography, one can see the gradual shift in the self-consciousness accompanying Pushpa's gradual rise in stature in the hindi sphere. Instead of trying to resolve the inconsistencies of the two-volume endeavours, this paper reads into the self-making process spanning nearly a decade the anxieties of one's changing role and representation in the public sphere.

Conclusion

In the wake of recent development in hindi print culture, this paper seeks to deepen the understanding of some salient features of the contemporary hindi public sphere by looking at communicative practices across forms and genre. To this effect the paper elaborated on narratorial strategies in Maitreyi Pushpa's two-part autobiography to explore possibilities of reading self-making practices within the larger, interactive print economy that the writer is immersed in. The book-form is a territorially marked site for the subject to continuously engage with this world. Working at the intersections of autobiography and print culture to study the relationship between claims of truth and storytelling mediated by commercial concerns within an expanding print market, the paper underscored that the autobiographical act is not just embedded within but *actively* references the discursive and material field of its production. Possibilities of theorizing agency and self-making at the intersections of narratology, cultural and media studies have been underscored.

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Notes

¹ The figurative translation of the title by Browarczyk as 'Kasturi and her jewel of a daughter' is helpful. She elaborates: the said verse comes from a couplet ("Kasturi kundal base/ mrig dhunde ban mahi"; <http://santkabirdas.blogspot.com/2012/02/kasturi-kundalbase-mrag-dhundhat-ban.html>) and refers to a musk deer that searches for the musk throughout the forest ignorant of holding the musk within his body. In her narrative, Pushpa extensively refers to the passages of Hindi literature. Chapter headings of both autobiographies quote verses from significant literary works in Hindi.

² "Issey Upannyaas kahoon ya aapbeeti..?" Browarczyk elaborates on this "provokingly titled Shall I call it a novel or an autobiography?—showcases Pushpa's viewpoint of the genre "It is possible that what happened is not in the story, and what is in the story, did not happen in the real life, but the foundation of this story are those perfect pictures vivid in my memories, even though I might have just heard about them from someone else or even though they might have originated in rumours about my own family." Pushpa seems

to subscribe to the idea that for an author composing a self-narrative, because of the interplay of memory and the externally and internally imposed censorship, writing is an exercise in narration that combines fictional and non-fictional elements. She rhetorically engages the audience in this reflection, simultaneously appealing to the reader's more empathic response to life stories. In the second volume she reconsiders these reflections, claiming the text to be a truthful account of her life with just a few aesthetic embellishments, but of importance only if liked by the readers." (225)

³For instance, a. "Chhah mahine beet gaye magar koi lene na aaya", meaning that six months have passed since the wedding, and nobody has come to take her back to her mother's. Mixed with a sense of abandonment is an embarrassment on behalf of the resourceless mother who is unable to arrange for her daughter's travel. b. the heavily leaden irony of "ma ke chalthey kaun si beti swabhiman nahi tod daalti?" (291), meaning as trained by the mother, a daughter can dismiss her self-respect. The lines are used when Maitreyi struggles to juggle new motherhood and marital responsibilities.

⁴Example: "aaj agar hum patit adham hain/iska kaaran galat niyam hain..."

"de di humein azadi bina kharag bina dhal/Sabarmati ke sant tune kar diya kamaal"

⁵Larka labaye ke misan, langar mo dhing aaye/gayo achaanak aanguri, chhati chael chhuaaye"

⁶Letter citation of sister-in-law, Kanchan detailing the longing to go back home to the small time.

⁷Pushpa, Maitreyi "Wah Safar tha ki mukaam tha: Memoirs by Maitreyi Pushpa". *Youtube*, uploaded by Dream Treaders Films Channel, 23 Jan. 2017, https://youtu.be/9I_H5PvOk_w

⁸"Maitreyi ne Dr. Siddharth aur Rajendra Yadav ke saath apne sambhandhon ko lagbhag aatmaheenta bebaaki ke saath sweekar kiya hai", quoted from the blurb, *Gudiya*.

⁹Though 1950s Hindi and English magazines look quite different from the serious and hefty miscellanies that were their colonial and nationalist forebears, many were by no means small. With impressive circulation figures, and some highly illustrated, these magazines were entrepreneurial in their 'literary activism' and consciously sought to provide quality and affordable reading material. Editors actively solicited new texts and promoted new writers, invested in translations, kicked off debates, and sought to actively engage readers through essay and story competitions.

¹⁰"Kitaab kitni hi swaantah sukhaaye kyun na ho, dusron ke Jeevan ko na prabhaavit karey toh kis kaam ki?"

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JOURNALS RECEIVED

British Journal of Aesthetics, Comparative Literature, New Literary History, Poetics Today, Philosophy and Literature, Critical Inquiry, Journal of Modern Literature, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism

The *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* (ISSN 0252-8169) is a quarterly peer-reviewed academic journal published by Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute, India since 1977. Vishvanatha Kaviraja, most widely known for his masterpiece in aesthetics, *Sahityadarpana* or the "Mirror of Composition", was a prolific 14th-century Indian poet, scholar, and rhetorician. The Institute was founded by Prof. Ananta Charan Sukla (1942-2020) on 22 August 1977, coinciding with the birth centenary of renowned philosopher, aesthetician, and art historian, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), to promote interdisciplinary studies and research in comparative literature, cultural theory, aesthetics, philosophy and criticism of the arts, art history, and history of ideas. He edited and published the journal for over 40 years as the founding editor.

The journal is committed to comparative and cross-cultural issues in literary understanding and interpretation, aesthetic theories, and conceptual analysis of art. It also publishes special issues on critical theories of current interest. It has published the finest of essays by authors of global renown like René Wellek, Harold Osborne, John Hoppers, John Fisher, Murray Krieger, Martin Bucco, Remo Ceserani, J B Vickery, Menachem Brinker, Milton Snoeyenbos, Mary Wiseman, Ronald Roblin, T R Martland, S C Sengupta, K R S Iyengar, V K Chari, Suresh Raval, S K Saxena, Gordon Epperson, Judith Lochhead, Charles Altieri, Martin Jay, Jonathan Culler, Richard Shusterman, Robert Kraut, T J Diffey, T R Quigley, R B Palmer, Keith Keating, and others. Some of these celebrated essays have been published by Routledge in book format.

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Advances in Neuroaesthetics: Narratives and Art as Windows into the Mind and the Brain

Guest Editors: Franziska Hartung (*Newcastle University, UK*)
Buddhika Bellana (*Glendon, York University Toronto, Canada*)

Humans spend an incredible number of their waking hours engaged in narratives and art. Some cognitive (neuro)scientists propose that our minds/brains are optimized to process information in the form of narratives. Some even claim that the way in which we experience our own lives has an inherently narrative character. Similarly, works of art can create and shape culture and elicit powerful emotional responses – responses that may be difficult to elicit otherwise. Why do narratives and art have such a hold over us? What might this affinity we have tell us about the architecture of our minds and brains?

Over the past 15 years, empirical research on literature, poetry, drama, arts, film, and dance have begun to gain a foothold in cognitive neuroscience. As cognitive neuroscientists, we have come to learn that our models of language, memory, and perception fall short of providing satisfactory accounts of our aesthetic experiences with narratives and art. Feeling immersed in a story or song, appreciating the beauty of a painting, or revelling in the lasting impact of a film or play are all essential parts of our psychological experience. This gap between cognitive neuroscience and aesthetics has become a fertile ground for empirical development and discovery.

In this special issue, we pay tribute to the latest advancements in understanding the human mind and brain through engagement with narratives and art, while also elucidating current challenges and laying out plans for future research. We invite submissions from behavioural and neurosciences, as well as current approaches from the humanities and media studies to contribute to an interdisciplinary dialogue. Our goal is to enhance understanding and communication between disciplines in order to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue and collaborations. We welcome contributions in forms of reviews, statement and opinion pieces, evolutionary approaches, as well as conceptual ideas, including theoretical models or proposed mechanisms underlying aesthetic experiences. Articles should be written for a broad academic audience without expert knowledge of a given discipline.